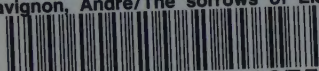


UNIV. OF ARIZONA

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Savignon, Andre/The sorrows of Elsie



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Sorrow's of
Elsie



ANDRÉ SAVIGNON



THE SORROWS OF
ELSIE

THE SORROWS OF ELSIE

By André Savignon

Translated from the French

—LA TRISTESSE D'ELSIE—

By Reginald J. Dingle

PQ

2637

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1927

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NEW YORK

Payson & Clarke Ltd.

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PAYSON & CLARKE LTD
FIRST EDITION

Printed in the United States of America by
J. J. LITTLE AND IVES COMPANY, NEW YORK

‘I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts.’

WORDSWORTH

TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

EVER since he won the Prix Goncourt in 1913 with a remarkable series of Ouesantaine sketches entitled *Filles de la Pluie*, M. André Savignon has been recognized by discriminating critics in France as one of the most considerable of contemporary writers. He is not one of the most prolific, for the new volume of short stories *La Dame de la "Sainte-Alice,"* just published by Messrs. Calmann-Lévy, brings the total of his books up to four. Of these, two deal with English life and another—the one which received the award from the Académie Goncourt—was written at Plymouth, where the scene of *Elsie* is laid. It is rather remarkable, therefore, that up to the present the only one of M. Savignon's books to appear in English has been *Le Secret des Eaux*.

To the reader of *Elsie*, it may seem still stranger that *Le Secret des Eaux* has no woman character and no sex interest. This should be sufficient to correct any hasty impression from the present volume that M. Savignon is one of the many contemporary writers afflicted with sex-obsession. Still less is he to be included

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among writers with a "message" or to be labelled in any of the philosophical groups into which French novelists fall so much more readily than our own. First, last and all the time M. Savignon is a literary artist, seeking by a most conscientious use of language to give a direct impression of certain aspects of life as he sees it. Not a photographic representation; atmosphere is his principal concern and it is impossible to read his pages with the concentration demanded of a translator and not to realize that every word has its own contribution to make towards the particular atmosphere desired. This does nothing to facilitate the always difficult task of translating from a Latin language into English. The difficulty is increased by M. Savignon's own deviation from what may be called the Latin norm. M. Paul Bourget, in one of his illuminating studies of the differences between Latin literature on the one hand and the Northern literatures on the other, has emphasized the clearness, precision and logicity of the one and the more mystical and amorphous character of the other. It is impossible to read *La Tristesse d'Elsie* without perceiving that M. Savignon

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has applied an essentially Latin mind, endowed with all the classical qualities of the Latin style, to an order of problem with which that mind does not ordinarily concern itself. Heine's famous dictum that the value of a doctrine cannot be determined until it has been translated into French crystallizes the Latin desire to have a rational universe, a world in which two and two will always make four, in contrast with the vague Teutonic longing for one in which they may make three or five, in which being gives place to becoming and contradictions are resolved in a higher unity. There is nothing new in the spectacle of a Frenchman attracted by this alternative way of regarding the universe. Renan is a conspicuous example of it, and in Maurice Barrès and a number of lesser contemporary writers there is to be detected a relativist and anti-intellectual philosophy which conflicts with the normal development of *le génie latin*. Renan, however, was not a novelist and Barrès is saved by the strong nationalism which blinded him to the inherent contradictions of his own position. Again and again in *Elsie* we find the central figure reaching out towards the vague and

imprecise, the unobtainable, in a fashion which, while it is wholly un-French is not English either. If Elsie's spiritual home at some moments is Germany it is clearly at other moments Russia—the Russia of the idiot-saints who commit murders and retain beautiful white souls. Such a passage as this is surely pure Slav: “Elle évoluait d'ailleurs dans un milieu si affranchi de tous les communs préjugés, de tout scrupule, de toute encombrante morale, que le bien et le mal ne comptaient plus. Et elle eut la vague intuition que s'avilir davantage, vivre selon son bon plaisir, au besoin, se rouler dans la fange, se repaître de vice, sans contrainte, innocemment, étaient le seul moyen d'atteindre à cette insensibilité, à cet endurcissement de l'âme, à cette sereine indifférence qui est comme un état sacré.”

But there is another difficulty to be added to the many which go to make a translator's foreword look so much like an essay on “Why I have Failed.” Again and again in *La Tristesse d'Elsie* the reader will find references to *régions étranges* or the like. No less persistently than Baudelaire, M. Savignon calls his readers *loin, loin d'ici*. As far as his French

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readers are concerned he is helped by his setting. The English provincial town, with its strange half-Celtic inhabitants and entirely un-Latin customs, is sufficiently exotic to harmonize with the spiritual exoticism of the story. With English readers it is different and the difficulty of harmonizing Elsie with her familiar surroundings becomes at times insuperable.

If the reader finds an exotic quality in this translation, which becomes at times rather an adaptation, he will realize that it is in a large measure deliberate and represents an inadequate attempt to capture the atmosphere of M. Savignon's book.

With the deeper implications of the story I am not here concerned, fascinating though they are. The reader will have no difficulty in recognizing M. Savignon as one of the *esprits inquiets*, expressing in this study of a sex-tortured woman that searching attitude which is common to them all. Sex and a vague religiosity stand here for something more fundamental. Perhaps the meaning of all such writing has been summed up for us by St. Augustine: *Fecisti nos ad te, et inquietum est cor*

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nostrum donec requiescat in te. But to follow up this line of thought would carry us far beyond the confines of a translator's apology for the imperfection of his work.

R. J. D.

LONDON, 1926

Part I

THE GIRL AND THE SHADOWS

CHAPTER I

EVEN in the continual ebb and flow of King Street, a strange figure recurring time and again cannot pass unnoticed. In fact, in spite of the general bustle, curious glances in plenty followed a certain solitary stroller, who evening after evening would return to a common seaman's lodging-house displaying the familiar inscription: "Well-aired beds, 3*d.*, 4*d.*, and 6*d.* per night. Men only." He appeared to have no other occupation than to saunter about the town, and although his gait, his weather-beaten face and his dress all proclaimed him a seaman, he seemed in no hurry to find a ship. He did not patronize the pawnshops, from which it may be assumed that his belt was well-lined; and at Corricks's fish-and-chip bar he always paid on the nail. He preferred, it seemed, to wander aimlessly about, without troubling, for the most part, to speak to anyone, respectable or otherwise, though he might have been seen occasionally with women in the neighbourhood of Laira Bridge and Prince Rock.

On one of his strolls he chanced to enter

Cload's "Tradesman's Arms"—a narrow little bar, conspicuous for its red light and green shutters, where the foaming porter was considered as good as in the old days when the publicans brewed it themselves. In the bar-parlour, as he entered, there were a woman, a certain Mrs. Higgins, a widow, and three of the regular patrons of the house, talking with Cload.

The stranger knocked on the wooden counter and ordered a pint, swallowing half of it at a gulp. Then, wiping his moustache, he listened carelessly to the talk of the bar. He fancied that he caught the name Graham Howard, and that the company was furtively sizing him up. He pricked up his ears.

One of the men was talking:

"Just then the ship's dog, a half-starved, shaggy brute, like a hyena, made for the falling piece—the second finger—and nabbed it with one bite——"

"How horrible!" ejaculated one of the listeners.

"Ghastly!" said Mrs. Higgins with a shudder, while the faces of the others lit up with interest.

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Cload contented himself with shaking his head in protesting fashion, but without comment. It is not good for a publican's prestige for him to show surprise.

"They say," went on the narrator, "that Howard didn't mean to play the game. So while the blood ran out from his hand, he took his revolver, and if it hadn't been for the Mexican he would have shot Donovan like a dog."

At that word a fearful oath shook the bar. Drawing himself up suddenly the stranger leaped off his stool towards the speaker.

"You're a liar," he shouted, banging his fist on the counter so that the glasses rattled. And taking another step towards the gossip, who stood like a man paralyzed, he shouted:

"You tell that damned tale again and I'll pull the tongue out of your mouth—you and the whole crowd of you."

His clay pipe, flung to earth in his fury, shattered to fragments with a little dry clatter. He strode towards the door, but before pushing it open with his foot, he turned once more and shook his fist menacingly at the room:

"You and the whole crowd of you."

He was gone before anyone dared utter a word.

Then Nathaniel Crigg, who was commonly called "The Jockey" but who was actually a watchmaker and a mender of chronometers and compasses, left his cushioned seat in the corner and whispered to the widow and the small shopkeepers, who were sweating with apprehension:

"I'll bet you that's the bloke himself—*the one that had his fingers cut off*. Did you notice how he kept his left hand in his pocket?"

Eight months before this incident a passenger at Millbay Docks, leaning against the rail of a tender belonging to the transatlantic services, was taking leave of a young woman on the quay.

The boat was already slowly moving away when the shrill voice of the siren rang out, now sharp, now wailing. The man waved his hand, the only farewell possible in the clamour, and the girl raised hers to her lips for a last kiss. He saw that she was repeating words which he could not hear and he stood watching her hungrily. She was beautiful, with a dignity of figure remarkable in a daughter of the

people, as her dress declared her, and there was about her that halo of sentiment which clings to those who are left waving while the ship puts out to sea.

Behind her as she stood there motionless, lay the town, the view of which became more general as the distance increased between the boat and the shore. In the deep, calm waters of the Great Western Docks the great funnels of vessels back from the Cape, the West Indies, Australia or New Zealand rose high above the roofs of the neighbouring warehouses; along the quays stretched long trains laden with grain, timber and bales of cotton and wool destined for the manufacturing towns. Beyond the docks the eye took in the maritime quarter, its musty sheds and offices alternating with inns and doss-houses. Further inland the modern town flaunted its well-planned streets, luxurious squares and green open spaces stretching back from the imposing hotels which looked across the Hoe to that Plymouth Sound from which Drake set out to conquer the Invincible Armada.

Yachts of all shapes and sizes, anchored by the dozen in a cove near the Winter Villa,

east of the pier, testified to the love of this island race for the element by which it lives. In the neighbourhood of Cremyll, sheltered by the defense batteries, there became visible as the tender glided out the submarine flotillas and the old and picturesque three-deckers, now transformed into training-ships. Beyond the Admiralty Victualling Yards, vibrating with the continuous percussion of the pneumatic riveting machines, lay Devonport Dockyard, guarding in its basin the old iron of the squadrons, whose lighter units stretched a mile or two along the shady banks of the Tamar. Trawlers and fishing boats sheltered, in the other direction, near the mouth of the Plym. On the horizon were the Victoria Docks, where sailing ships of all nations mingled with the cargo boats.

And then, when it seemed that all the sounds of the shore were deadened, a hundred clocks, with soft and silvery chime, gave simultaneously the last adieu from "Home, Sweet Home." The ripples on the water became sharper and deeper. Near at hand sprang up the lights of the breakwaters and the buoys dancing on the waves. Destroyer followed de-

stroyer, a dozen torpedo-boats passed quickly one behind the other like a moving train, all dark in their black smoke, ungraceful, unconcerned with elegance, simply business-like and preoccupied like men of affairs, with something suggestive of the bulldog in their silhouettes, something tenacious, brutal, and inescapable as death itself.

It was only when falling night covered the tender heading towards the lights of its liner in Cawsand Bay, that Pat Donovan, the sailor, discovered at his side his comrade, Graham Howard. The latter had not obtruded himself, but he felt a tightening of the throat at the sight of the fine girl Donovan had so lately held in his arms.

"Hullo!" he said, "pretty girl that you're leaving."

"Isn't she?" agreed Pat. "Good girl, too," he added.

"Engaged?"

"Not yet," said Donovan, with regret in his voice.

As a matter of fact, though he did not mention this detail, he had known her only since the day before yesterday when he set foot in

Plymouth to take passage with Howard on the same boat.

Before it could develop, their conversation was abruptly cut short. The tender stopped amid a grinding of screws. Over against it, like a vast wall dotted with innumerable luminous eyes, rose the liner, itself as yet motionless. High up, hundreds of heads looked curiously at the tiny boat that had approached the leviathan. There was a tumult of voices. It was like stumbling in the dark against a six-storied house, or upon a town risen suddenly out of black immensity and lit by thousands of lamps.

A gangway was thrown from one vessel to the other, and while the mail was being taken aboard, the tide of passengers from the tender passed through an entrance that disclosed itself half-way up the liner's side.

The new arrivals passed one by one down a narrow way lined with passengers already on board. On all hands there were exclamations, murmurs of recognition, handshakes. Howard and Donovan in their turn, bent beneath their canvas bags, passed in among the officers who were bestowing the passengers according to

their classes in the midst of a blinding glare of lights, a harsh babel of tongues and a wild assortment of races, English, German, Slav, and particularly dark-skinned Italian emigrants trailing their families behind them. The confusion lasted long, but order was at last established; the shriek of the ship's whistle drowned the voices, the trumpets blew "Rule Britannia", and finally the great vessel, after three blasts of the siren, glided out towards the open sea.

* * * * *

The two seamen had already been shipmates for five years. Their destinies seemed in fact intertwined, for they were now going out together to Halifax to rejoin the same cargo-boat, the *Argyle*.

The crossing was short, and soon after their arrival in Canada, the *Argyle* left for Jamaica, where Donovan hoped to find news of the girl he had left at Plymouth. Disappointment, however, awaited him. They took to sea again, and at Halifax, Montreal, Charleston and New Orleans, Donovan looked in vain for an answer to the letters he had faithfully despatched at every port of call.

He and the girl were almost strangers—that he realized. They had kissed and that was all. But her kiss had enfevered his lips, and the fever had spread to his whole being. He could not doubt that Elsie was sincere. In the most innocent intercourse a woman may, in a sense, yield herself, and it was in that sense that Elsie seemed to have given herself to him. How then could she so soon forget? He was puzzled. The honest passion that he seemed to have read in those eyes! Was it simply a lie, a trap, a common bit of play-acting? And if so, to what purpose? What was there to gain?

It was a familiar story—an evening's meeting in the crude gaiety of an English seaport street, a passing word and a stroll together. They had walked along in a dreamy fashion, till they came at last, very late, to her parents' house, where even then there seemed no reason why they should separate, since similar couples were still making love in all the friendly doorways round. Simply a passing caprice without consequences. They hardly knew each other and might never meet again.

Only in this country are relations of such a

kind possible. Elsewhere, though the girls might be unwilling, the men would require a more definite reward for a night's attentions. It needs a special order of sentiment to enjoy these long ecstasies, that spring often from nothing more than a mere instinctive attraction. They are possible only to a sentimental people, a people entirely devoid of the Latin sense of wit and proportion, to whom physical contact alone can constitute complete delight, and who can lose themselves at a touch in a dumb mist of sentimentality. They are the ecstasies of a people childish beyond measure, dominated by the herd instinct, the need to live like sheep, to think the same thoughts, to whistle the same tune. So the hours pass. The words exchanged take on, as night deepens, a greater urgency; the minutes seem supreme. The flirtations are sometimes less sensual, no doubt, than a stranger would imagine, but not always so innocent as the mother professes when she sees her daughter with her young man, and they are always devoid of that witty coquetry native to France. They are no mental diversion, no play of mind; simply an exercise of the heart, an organ which, like the rest of the

English body, must have its sport to feel itself alive. It is an exercise of hearts that inflame easily and go out quickly without regrets on either side; one has been "making love" and that is enough. A young girl lets herself fall into your arms thinking of nothing, and without even any particular liking for you yourself. You are a man and that suffices for the moment. But take care! If you should happen to forget yourself and go a step farther than she does, a sharp box on the ears may recall you to your senses. The situation is full of indecision. How far can a man go? He hesitates, trembling at the idea of a profanation. Is she a good girl, after all? But surely not so good as that! Half charmed by the uncertainty, he plays with the notion of finding her after all less strict than she makes out, and finds in her kiss—the kiss impeccable, because it leaves no trace—the hint that she is making the longest show she can of virtue simply to sweeten his conquest when she allows it at the end.

But this Elsie, who was she, what was she, who repaid her lover's letters only with silence? The fierce heat of the tropics increased Dono-

van's impatience. He discussed it with Howard, and the two men, according to their own primitive interpretation of the sex, exchanged their views on feminine eccentricities.

Probably she was one of those good girls who let themselves go for a moment and listen to you and then drop you. There are some who keep themselves clean even in mud and retain their nobility under their rags and tatters, not because they are cold or because of any particular moral discipline, but because they keep, in the midst of the filth in which they live, a secret and morbid passion, a pride in not sinking with the rest, which gives them in obscure fashion, the sensation of tasting life; or maybe they keep themselves intact because so far the irresistible passion has not come their way. How sweet to the roughest of men is the kiss of such a girl, the virgin kiss of one whose innocence is not ignorance, but who means to keep herself body and soul, until the day that she is conquered. Yet on the other hand there are some who give the appearance of being above their surroundings, who seem like flowers in a hideous world, and who yet will sell them-

selves for half a crown to the first roué that passes.

What kind was she, this Elsie, and what had become of her? Would she write in the end? She was an enigma. Nothing about her was plain.

One day, at last, at Santiago, when Donovan disembarked, he found a bulky envelope, bearing his name. At first he did not dare to open it, restrained by an unreasonable fear. He had almost reconciled himself to the darkness into which she had thrown him, to a cherishing of the bonds she had inflicted. Suppose everything was at an end!

But no! The letter was too bulky. It could not be simply "Good-bye," the announcement of a rupture of relations. Roughly he opened the envelope. It seemed to him that he was dreaming. Five of his own letters, all the pages he had so laboriously written, were there. Some had not even been opened. In his stupefaction he let them fall to the ground, and on the slip of paper which rested in his hand he read these inexplicable words:

"As if love was the great business of life, the only thing that mattered!"

CHAPTER II

BE reasonable, Donovan," said Howard a few weeks later, in a little Mexican port where they had put in to take on cargo. "She's not in love with you. I knew that from the first."

"You think so?" asked Donovan, turning pale.

"I am sure."

And it seemed to Donovan that this decided "I am sure" of Howard's was delivered with satisfaction, and this man whose friendship he had never had occasion to question showed himself decidedly queer—huffy, in fact—where Elsie was concerned. It was as if he was jealous!

From day to day since leaving England he had kept Howard acquainted with his successive states of mind, his self-satisfied joy in the first flush of his hopes, his surprise at the inexplicable silence, his growing doubts and fears, and finally his torment at the thought that this girl who had so pathetically given him her lips could be a common cheat and forget him in an hour. And Howard, the patient listener, al-

lowed himself little by little to be captivated by this overflowing poem of passion, slowly recited in the course of monotonous passages, until in the end he found himself following its development with an extraordinary interest. For the first time he felt intimately troubled; a strange emotion stirred his heart and made such surprising and treacherous progress that soon he was entirely under its domination. What else could be expected? His life up to now had not been an overflowing cup. His love affairs were sordid adventures that had left behind ugly memories and a bitter taste in the mouth. Perhaps it was simply that he had never heard that song of the heart that idealizes and beautifies the world. Perhaps he had not yet met his fate, or it had not found him ready. His hour had not struck. But now he had seen the light afar off, he had made the acquaintance of love, and like the rest he went on his way happy in his unhappiness, nursing his bleeding wound. He, no less anxious than Donovan, waited in his turn for the letters that did not come. They would at least have told him something of this woman whom he had

seen only for an instant and whom he had since silently adored.

He persuaded himself she had seen him at the docks when they left England, and he stood motionless behind his friend. How could she have ignored the searching look he had directed towards her? She, too, he was ready to swear it, had trembled under that exchange of glances, so rapid and yet so unforgettable; and she had kept the memory of the passing stranger that he was. In his fever, it pleased him to imagine that if she had not answered Donovan, that was her manner of entering into communication with him, Graham Howard, and sending out to him a word of hope.

So the heart deceives itself, taking its wish for the fact; on such self-deception our acts, our sentiments, our hatreds too often depend. Howard, in actual fact, was jealous. He felt a grudge against Donovan for claiming as his own an incomparable girl, endowed with all those inaccessible perfections that we attribute in our dreams to the secret spouse, sister of the spirit and the flesh, to that exceptional and tender friend, created for ourselves alone, whom one day, sooner or later, we must meet.

He was irritated by the confidences of his comrade, to which he had to lend a patient ear. And then that singular and disturbing reply! "As if love was the only business of life, the only thing that mattered!" Howard, no less than Donovan, racked his brains for its meaning.

What had she meant to say? Wasn't love the great, the all-important thing? What a frigid and unnatural soul she must have to dismiss with such a sally the truth proclaimed on all sides.

On reflection, Howard could find only one solution, plausible and comforting—that Donovan was not loved and that Elsie's heart remained to be won.

"Take my word for it, old chap," he said one day with his usual rather brusque frankness, when Donovan seemed more melancholy than usual. "You'd better forget all about it. That girl isn't in love with you, so what's the use of wasting so much paper and pestering her into the bargain? Leave her alone; you'll never be her man."

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But the Irishman bit his lips and replied: "Oh, that's what *you* think, is it? Then let me tell you this. As long as I've got any breath in my body it will go hard with the man who lifts his eyes to her."

"Very good," retorted Howard. "We can settle that little matter when you like."

From that moment they did not exchange another word, and as far as their work permitted they avoided all intercourse. As his berth was below Howard's, Donovan henceforth passed his nights on the deck, while Howard, who was already taciturn, became grimmer than ever. Twice a day each would go off to eat alone, away from the vain comments of the crew, nursing his hatred and watching the other stealthily.

Howard, in Donovan's eyes, was simply a traitor. How foolish to have shown him the letters, to have given him Elsie's name, and even the address! He came even to suspect Howard of having written to the young woman to decry him and to steal her love. He compared himself to a blind man who had handed the key of his cash-box over to a thief and

asked him to count and admire his pieces of gold.

He jumped up in the night dreaming that he held his old comrade by the throat, or else that he saw him in Elsie's arms and they both turned from him jeering.

It only increased his rage to realize that, as a matter of fact, he had no particular claim on Elsie, and that Howard was just as much entitled as he to lay siege to her, since she had not even answered his letters. How bitterly he regretted not having on his finger some ring that she had given him, or even her photograph. What would he not have given for even such feeble pledges. How it would crush Howard's insolence.

But, no, he had nothing; not even a lock of hair, not even a letter. And this man whose austere passion had not even in desire done violence to Elsie, came to regret fiercely that he could not claim to have possessed her. He dreamed of bearing on his own flesh some indelible mark of what he forced himself to call "their love." This drove him down one evening to the poorer quarters of the town where he confided himself to the care of a negro

tattooer, who printed right in the middle of his breast, in large letters, the words: "Elsie for Ever!"

It was a long and painful operation. A garland of red and blue flowers enlivened the inscription, and a little lower down, by way of a symbol, there were two interlaced hearts, pierced by a single arrow. But after the first smarting of the skin, tumefied by the prick of the needles, Donovan, with a childish pride, felt impatient to reveal to all and sundry that he had dedicated his existence to the most desirable of women. In full daylight, to spite Howard, he performed his toilet on the deck and, nude to the waist, exhibited to the eyes of his false friend the solemn witness of his love. The other growled between his teeth and turned on his heel.

With the calmer temperament of the Anglo-Saxon, Howard at first ignored this extreme nerviness and sensibility of the Celt, always given, after the manner of his kind, to extremes of enthusiasm and despair. The Englishman had taken it into his head to win Elsie, that was all, and he counted on his tenacity to do it. He knew the difficulties of the struggle,

but he felt within himself the assurance of victory and, as he looked at it, this assurance gave him his rights. Elsie was his from that day and for ever.

Admirable virtue of this square-jawed people; what they want is theirs because they know they can get it. Howard could from that moment declare his rights without lying; and he could at the same time swear on the Bible to have them.

But in his turn, in spite of his natural coolness and his vigorous self-confidence, Howard finished by catching the fever of those adventurous regions of love towards which he had allowed himself to be drawn. He, too, had henceforth only one thought, one morbid desire, which the lassitude and the heavy enervating heat of the tropics accentuated; he too, had only one ambition—Elsie.

They rarely went ashore in these days. Even at nightfall, when the noisy posadas opened their doors to the crew of the steamship, they were to be seen resting aboard or striding up and down the deck. They seemed at once to avoid each other and to lie in wait.

One evening, when the Irishman, in order to

kill time, had stayed behind to give another coat of paint to a boat, he noticed Howard leaning against the chart-house, and it seemed to him that there was altogether too much insistence in his rival's stare. The port and the town seemed weighed down with a melancholy torpor, which in its turn was heavy with strange intoxicating scents, some exquisite and unexpected, others nauseating. Not a breath of wind stirred. The quay was deserted. Only some way away, a group of beggars, picturesque in their rags, loitered in the shadow of the gaudily-coloured houses. An unknown race, an unknown world, drawing life and character from this low brooding atmosphere, that hung above it like a langourous, evil spell; a race full of idleness and treachery, ready at an instant's notice to laugh or cry or to plunge into a savage quarrel for the sake of the resultant peace.

Donovan felt his irritation rise at the increasing provocativeness of Howard's regard. Three times he surprised the eyes of the other fixed upon him. Starting up he walked straight over to his former friend. Howard was ready for him.

At that moment a sound of feet was heard,

and the light notes of a banjo, then the wide hat of a half-caste appeared at the edge of the quay. Two natives followed. With great difficulty they succeeded in separating the adversaries.

Indifferent to the dispute, one of the natives strolled away to smoke his cigar in the rays of the setting sun, while, sitting against the netting, the banjo player continued idly to caress his instrument.

"So you're fighting, you two," sneered the half-caste, "anybody'd think to look at you you were a couple of women pulling each other's hair out. Bah!" He spat contemptuously.

The two men looked at him in surprise. He laughed again, evilly. His atavistic jealousy of the white man lightened up his coarse face. He said, provocatively:

"Do you know what two Indians did last week? The right sort they were! Do you know what to do——" He paused for a moment, and then, slowly weighing every word, "when it's a matter, as it is with you, not of fooling but of life or death?"

Howard and Donovan knew what he was talking about. The story he wanted to tell

them had been noised abroad on the coast. The reminder whipped their anger to fever point.

"All right!" they exclaimed together, "we'll fight like that."

"You mean that? You'll stick it out?"

He was ferociously enjoying this hatred he had stirred up. Excited by their anger and his taunts, the sailors had abandoned all self-control.

"An Irishman is never afraid," said Pat.

"One Englishman is always worth two Irish."

"That's the way to talk!"

With his most caressing air the Mexican continued: "Sit like me on the deck. You here . . . yes! The other facing you: that's right. Now, listen: you put your hand like this, flat."

"We know."

"And this is how you hold the knife. You understand?"

Thereupon the native explained how, with the long knife that the Spaniards call the navaja, each man was to cut off a finger from his adversary's hand, submitting himself in turn to the same mutilation.

The sailors did not flinch; they were past that. Yet, they stared at each other with dazed eyes. Could they be dreaming? And, in truth, under that sky, in that strange setting, among people so different from themselves that it was hard to recognize in them any connecting link of human nature, all sense of reality seemed to have escaped them. For a second, while their civilized consciences stirred within them, they were on the point of throwing off the evil spell which this demon had cast over their love and their hate. But an abominable false shame restrained them. Perhaps the subtle poison of the atmosphere had done its work. Or they were helpless in the grip of that strange madness that love and the evil passions will sometimes let loose upon the human heart. Whatever it was, they were silent; they looked askance like men already guilty; their hatred carried them away.

"So" went on the half-caste "each finger of the left hand is cut off in turn. . . . After the fingers you go for the wrists. I'll tell you later what to do next, but I think," he added, "that you'll cry halt before that."

"Enough said!" shouted Howard. Donovan, too, was at the end of his patience.

Now the ferocious duel was accepted and inevitable their courage did not falter. But a secret instinct made them revolt against the ignoble pleasure they were invited to take in the sight of each other's mutilation and torture. It would have been easier to act in this insensate fashion under the impulse of some brutal fit of passion; but they were told to mark the steps slowly. They were left to consider in cold blood the abyss into which they were plunging. There was silence. The three men crouched without a sound. The banjo resumed its melancholy tune.

"Above all, no hurry," repeated the half-caste. "Watch the eyes, look out for the least weakening in your man, and at the first sign of giving in, take this revolver in the other hand, and finish him off. That's how it has to end. A shot for the first who shows funk."

The banjo player, indifferent to the drama under his eye, continued his maddening music. It fell to Howard's lot to offer his hand first to the blade, and his little finger was detached without the movement of a muscle of his face.

Then Donovan took his turn. And while the blood ran out upon the deck, as the fingers fell one by one from the lopped hands, the banjo, as if electrified, exalted the mad butchery in tragic and despairing accents. Meanwhile, very slowly and rhythmically, in a lisping and monotonous voice, the man with the sombrero marked the scene step by step with a slow crazy chant.

One finger, two fingers,
The third finger falls.
Now for the middle finger,
After that the thumb.
The blood runs out from the stumps.

They were on the point of cutting off their wrists when the chief engineer arrived with the steward and cut short the horrible business. Indignantly he took the poor wretches to the hospital to be tended.

Their insensate behaviour was put down to a touch of fever, and since nobody made any complaint, the matter was allowed to drop. The captain could not afford to lose two men, and he was quite willing to keep them on the *Argyle*, the more so because from that day they did not display the slightest ill-will towards

each other. Indeed at Bahia, Howard saved Donovan's life when he fell into the water one night as he was coming aboard.

Once more they were inseparables, until the day when they agreed that Howard should return to England to make inquiries which concerned them both. To aid their common enterprise, Donovan even handed over to him a part of his savings.

CHAPTER III

FROM Liverpool, where he disembarked, Graham Howard hastened to Plymouth. He had vowed that he would see Elsie Farquhar and speak to her. For a fortnight, however, though he inquired of every one who seemed likely to help him, he tried in vain to obtain news of the girl. She was evidently little known. At the address she had given they did not even know her name, a fact which greatly disconcerted the sailor.

As a last resort he tried his luck among the women who haunt the public-houses in the neighbourhoods of Cattedown and Stonehouse, but there, as elsewhere, Elsie was unknown. There were the police, of course, but there was good reason for not thinking of them. Nothing but a lucky chance meeting seemed to offer Graham Howard any hope of fulfilling the mission he had undertaken.

Discouraged but determined, he made his way along the streets, his restless eye looking curiously into the faces of the women passers-by, glancing up at those that looked out of the windows, hoping always to recapture the face

he had seen that once for a moment as he looked back to the docks. So inquisitorial was his manner that more than once he was taken for a "tec." The closing time of the music-halls and the cinemas found him on the pavement studying the faces of the emerging crowds; he stood musing at busy crossings, won every now and then to false hope by a resemblance, entering eagerly into conversation with young and old women alike in the hope of chancing upon some information for his aid. But he heard none. He came at last himself to believe that the girl had disappeared.

Finally, he happened upon somebody who knew her—a certain Victoria Potts, whom Howard asked to arrange an interview, declaring that he had a message which must be delivered in person.

"It's a good while since I saw Elsie," said Victoria, "but if you'll come with me I'll take you to her house."

"Good," answered Howard, shortening his stride to hers. In silence, since the sailor was no talker, they made their way through the crowd that gathers every afternoon round the big shops in Bedford Street and Old Town

Street, and finally, plunging down Treville Street, they found themselves suddenly in the oldest quarter of the town.

The contrast was remarkable. Indeed here again was something possible only to a people strongly positive, insensitive to fine distinctions. A few yards from the imposing shops which reflect the pride of the trading aristocracy, and one stands at the very heart of the squalor, the toil and the suffering which are the price at which that prosperity is bought.

The stranger soon learns, however, that some secret instinct, the recognition perhaps of his indefinable "respectability," will save him from any unpleasant experience when he plunges thus into a world he would not enter except at the call of business, a world in which it is well not to be too critical or to give free play to moral indignation. The gaudy fronts of the great stores give place to small shops where the bare necessities of life are sold in ha'penny-worths, and to the too numerous pawnshops, decorated with their ancient Lombard symbol of three golden balls. Strange and unpleasant odours rise on all sides. The harsh smell of leather from a workshop where a score of

men are busily mending shoes, mingles with the fumes from the boiling oil in the fish-and-chip shop, outside which a patient queue wait for their portions of the less delicate fruits of the sea. A printing works discharges its hot breath into the street to mingle with the varied odours of the druggist's, and the heavy fumes of alcohol from the narrow doors of the public-house hang over all. The varied noises of the shipping and the smell of oil declare the proximity of the water. No more taxicabs or private motor cars, but only delivery vans and heavy motor lorries that work havoc on the roads, and hawkers pushing their barrows and rending the air with their cries.

The elegant and restful figures of the more prosperous quarter have given place to the wan and ill-clad women and girls with dirty aprons over their tattered skirts.

This squalid humanity is chiefly to be found in the dark lanes that run out from the main arteries of the town. In these slums houses are dilapidated to a point at which one might well imagine them to be uninhabitable. Entering the narrow streets, one has the sensation of fog filling the throat, as if one were under-

ground, and on all sides rises a stench that outrages the very name of public health. Sheets, blankets and all kinds of clothing hang from the black, uncurtained windows; a din of ribald songs and family quarrels pierces the thin brick walls that divide household from household, a single room often sufficing for an entire family. And now and then from these hovels emerge figures which seem hardly to have been made for exposure to the light of day, figures that recall a world described by Dickens and which until this moment seemed to belong entirely to fiction and the past.

The flesh, however, in spite of the horror of its surroundings, has by no means relinquished the will to live and to multiply. Flocks of children clamour on all sides; overflowing from the pavements into the middle of the road, they seem almost to have generated spontaneously in a night, so amazingly prolific in spite of all their social taints are those slum-dwellers, urged to rankest promiscuity by their overcrowded houses. Degenerate and ravaged by phthisis, they have yet managed to respect the law dictated by the strong, "Work and multiply," and by their labour and their fecundity

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to make possible the luxury of their betters. Light-heartedly they abandon themselves to the only instinct which they are at liberty to indulge. Skillful economists, they have reduced the cost of living to a point at which they need take no thought for the necessities of their existence.

Men pass by, livid in their pallor, others with vivid red hair, and bronzed-faced Celts, hailing with their boats from Penzance or Fowey, with large ebony "kiss-curls" over their foreheads. Passing through the crowd to their homes in the heart of this squalid region are the fishermen in oilskins and sea-boots that protect them up to the thighs. They move along in bands, like an advancing tide, their shoulders swaying from side to side. And these too, if they appear to bring with them something of the movement of the everlasting ocean, still wear the same worried and subservient expression as the toilers in the slums.

The scene is worth close observation. There are both comedy and drama in the slums. The appeal of vice, the outstretched hand of temptation, dumb despair, fear, love, hunger, envy and the love of barter, all are disclosed, crude

and naïve. A young mother carrying a child waits outside a bar for two men who have gone in to drink. . . . A trio of gossips discuss the scandalous conduct of Smith the baker, who is refusing credit. Outside a bankrupt tradesman's door, urchins with husky voices offend the ear with insolent songs, while sordid creatures without age or identity, too desperate even to beg, walk straight before without hope or goal. While street arabs rend the air, young girls with precocious smiles brush against one provokingly. A factory discharges its hands in groups . . . a libertine pursues his frightened prey to the end of an alley . . . and motionless, respected by all, in the middle of the road, the big figure of the policeman maintains the semblance of decency in this home of slaves.

One's impulse is to run, to escape. But it is the same everywhere—more workshops, more long walls covered with posters, everywhere along the pavements the same frontages on which "business" has set its brutalizing seal, and at every street corner fresh faces which seem eternally the same. Anguish clutches at the throat: where to escape?

In the midst of this cold materialism there

is a surprising number of hideous brick buildings, mission halls and chapels, set up with no more care than is apparent in the other buildings to avoid the utilitarian repulsiveness of the quarter. Lurid placards on their walls, such as might advertise a boot polish or some other commercial commodity, make an urgent and sincere appeal to weary overburdened souls to escape from this valley of ugliness and corruption. Taking refuge inside one of these temples, one finds it hard to believe in the hell without. Everything inside is agreeable and enticing, with a cleanliness, a moral polish, so to speak, which by its very flatness and artificiality is calculated to reduce a Latin mind to despair. All around are immaculately dressed clergymen, young university men in high collars, blonde girls with marvellously candid eyes, and nurses whose blue or brown floating veils suggest modestly the perfection of the angels.

Through this region Howard and Victoria took their way.

Now and then in the course of their walk Victoria would glance at her companion co-

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quettishly, but her smiles were wasted on Howard, who followed with his lips sealed.

At last they arrived at Kathleen Street, the narrow sloping street in the waterside quarter where Elsie lived with her father and her step-mother. They mounted the rickety staircase to the Farquhars' apartment. They knocked, but there was no answer. Victoria turned to another door which led direct, she said, to Elsie's room. But there, too, there was no response.

Howard did not conceal his disappointment.

"You really must see her?" Victoria asked, in a tone which seemed to imply: "There are other girls in the world."

"It is absolutely necessary," the sailor replied.

But Victoria could not persuade herself that Howard merely wanted to oblige a friend as he had said, and that his search was quite disinterested.

"Elsie is not a cheerful sort of girl," she insinuated, looking boldly into the man's eyes. "They say she's rather offish with men."

"Never mind! I've got to find her."

"I wonder whether you, a sailor-man, won't be a bit disappointed with her."

"That will be my lookout."

Victoria could hardly be expected to know that what she had said could only increase Howard's anxiety to succeed in his search.

They stood together on the edge of the pavement. A young man and a young woman with their time their own might spend an hour very pleasantly. The cinemas were lighting up, the street corners were echoing with laughter, the sweet shops flaunted their multi-coloured confections and couples passed gaily with an air of festival. Here and there in the main streets the fife-and-drum or brass bands of Boys' Brigades, Scouts, or Salvationists dominated the general roar, and street organs added their quota to the din.

Victoria still smiled, but Howard's thoughts were far away. He knew now that he could get no more from his guide. Moreover, he knew Elsie's address. But since Victoria did not seem in any hurry to leave him he lent a distracted ear to her talk.

It surprised Victoria that Elsie seemed able to please men, though she disdained to notice their attentions. . . . She was a strange girl.

She had no real friends; she kept to herself. She turned once again to Howard.

"Is she worth worrying about any more?"

But Howard continued to ignore all blandishments.

Her tongue once loosened, the girl chattered on. Only last night, just think of it, she had heard that two men had had a furious fight over Elsie in an American port.

"Really!" The sailor was full of surprise, while he thrust his left hand deeper into his pocket.

The girl was ready with more detail, but Howard's curiosity did not go so far. Taking a two-shilling piece from his purse he gave it to Victoria for her pains and left her.

* * * * *

This search of Howard's, no less than the sailors' reconciliation, was the outcome of their strange duel. On the morrow of it, they had been tortured by a great doubt. Was the girl worth it?

Gazing regretfully at their mutilated hands, the shameful witnesses of their common aberration, they had been unable to decide whether

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or not the sacrifice was out of proportion to the merits of the prize.

The thing must be cleared up. Accordingly they tossed a coin to decide who should carry out the inquiry. If the girl was found not worthy of their love, she was to be killed to avenge them both. The lot had fallen to Graham Howard.

CHAPTER IV

VICTORIA POTTS was dying to get married, but she allowed it to be seen. That is a mistake which results in men keeping their distance. (For her pathetic ambition Elsie had nothing but scorn.)

The two girls made their way together, in the Saturday evening gaiety, along the interminable street that joins the three maritime towns of Plymouth, Stonehouse, and Devonport. A fine rain, almost a sort of watery dust, fell on a crowd which familiarity had rendered indifferent to it, and did nothing to disturb the light-heartedness of a public seeking its pleasure or doing the necessary shopping before the Sunday rest. Highland soldiers in their white tunics and kilts, Royal Marines impressively upright in their red uniforms, flourishing their canes, and bluejackets whose broad-bottomed trousers emerged from beneath their black oilskins like elephants' feet, relieved the monotony of the civilian crowd.

"I say, Elsie," Victoria asked her, "would you be content to be an old maid all your life?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, don't be silly . . ."

But Elsie was in earnest:

"Do you think I'd marry, me? I wouldn't dream of it." She added reflectively: "Before I'd marry I should want to be absolutely certain that I was in love, a really big love . . . nothing else would do. . . . But there," and the girl sighed, "I'm never going to marry."

What a queer girl she was!

But it was not for nothing that Victoria Potts was nicknamed "Cheeky."

"Yet," she went on, "if what they're saying is true . . ."

She hesitated, intimidated in some way by the extraordinary ascendancy that Elsie seemed to assert over everybody. Was it that unusual light that seemed sometimes to shine in her eyes? Perhaps. . . . She seemed in some sort of way to be so different from others that one could never feel quite comfortable with her.

"You were saying——" suggested Elsie, as her companion paused.

"Well," said Victoria, summoning her courage, "you've had the best proof of love a woman could want. Two men have nearly killed each other for you."

"A yarn! Don't talk about it; I hate to think of it. Two sailors, drunk for certain."

Victoria was surprised at her friend's agitation and even more by something sad in her tone. She had expected a sharp retort and what she got was a plaint, a confession of dissatisfaction. She had never known Elsie quite like this.

For some time they both remained silent.

What they said about Elsie was that she was odd, stuck-up. She didn't laugh like other girls or take part in their skylarking. For the most part she kept aloof, dreamy and apparently indifferent. Very occasionally, though, she would rush into the wildest of spirits. There was something rather frightening about her then. All the time she seemed to be tormented, perhaps half-unconsciously, by a desire for something she did not possess—something better.

Such characters only betray themselves by accident, and they return passionately upon themselves. They are accused of "strangeness," and indeed to them everything around them is strange. Sometimes they get a sense of their own isolation and make an effort to

reconcile their ideal with the world in which they have to live. In order to be like the rest of the world, they may even yield excessively, and in spite of themselves, to the rebellious demands of their nature; they try to make their peace with Life that is always wounding them. Their temperament, thirsting after the Absolute, will not admit of half-measures, so they throw themselves into the torment with a headstrong violence which more normal natures find puzzling and disconcerting. Then, deceived afresh by each new experience of the kind, they retire more obstinately than ever within themselves, returning to their own secret longings on which some mysterious Inner Light seems to shine. Their lives naturally present to the world a spectacle of perpetual contradiction. With each retreat from life they pursue more jealously than ever the cult of a self conformed in every way to their dreams. Sustained by some inner power, they resolve to compromise no more. By a sort of autosuggestion they come readily to believe that they are always in the presence of the Supernatural.

Elsie had always been "queer," but this evening she was positively unrecognizable.

"I'm all ruffled," she said at last. "I don't know what it is, but I've got a feeling that I'm going to do something silly. I don't know what, but something seems to have got hold of me. Something that I'm afraid of, but that draws me on. I must give in to it. I don't know why." She fell silent, but added at last: "I suppose I want to see the other side of things."

"The other side?"

"Oh, you don't understand."

Three boys passing jostled against the girls and made as if to follow them, but they hurried on and went up towards the toll-gate bridge which crosses a strip of sea water. A salt spray caressed their faces. Soon they passed from the garish lights of the main street to a strange nocturnal scene. Factory chimneys on both sides of the parapets emitted a reddish smoke, and lights danced up and down on the waters. Tugs moved to and fro under their feet, their noise combining with that of the road vehicles to drown the voices of pedestrians who walked with heads bent in the drizzle.

At last, turning to the right, they came to

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the Hancock Show, the huge fair-ground, given over to roundabouts, rifle ranges, gipsy fortune-tellers and stalls laden with sweets and confectionery. A strange medley of humanity moved about over the mud and clinkers—soldiers, sailors and women of the street with disordered hair that matched the greater disorder written on their faces. Ragged urchins, their eyes wide open to all the evil round them, jostled with pale-faced youths who seemed to have slipped away from their parents, workmen and servants enjoying their “day out.” Some of the faces were those of women who had only just commenced the easy and fatal descent; others were far advanced. There were girls in the early teens whose figures indicated their condition. With it all there was no real pleasure, no true gaiety, only the shrill, cackling laughter of the women, every now and then a sudden piercing scream, and grinding on without end the pitiless music of the roundabouts, and the raucous cries of the gipsies offering their wares. It was a scene of dreary mirth that might at any moment degenerate into savagery. In all the corners lovemaking was going on without any sense of shame.

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The white cliffs which ran along in front of this fair-ground gave the sinister impression of a cemetery wall; behind a hoarding at the back there were workshops and mechanical sawyards and along the quays grimy workmen, looking like black demons, worked on into the morning discharging ships.

Since Elsie was so despondent this evening, Victoria felt that she might say what she pleased.

"I say, Elsie, were you in love with those two men?"

"In love? I *don't* think. I didn't know one of them and I had hardly as much as seen the other. In love! I'd as soon give myself to the first chap that came along."

"The first chap," exclaimed Victoria, much amused. "I say, you're going it a bit strong. Everybody knows you're not that sort."

Then, moved to mischief, she added: "You'd be afraid, for one thing."

"I've never been afraid of anything—except myself," replied Elsie.

"Really? Well, look at that nice boy over there. He's looking at you too." She laughed.

"I'll take you at your word. You said the first that came along; why not take him?"

Some yards away in the shade, standing by the side of a rifle-range, a man was watching the two girls, but his eyes rested especially upon Elsie. His gaze was so provocative that Victoria felt a pleasurable thrill of anticipation. She could not repress a smile of amusement, which the stranger regarded as an invitation. He came forward.

Victoria's curiosity was stronger than other emotions.

"What are you going to do, Elsie?" she demanded.

It would be pleasant to find that Elsie was not so very different from herself after all, and that she was going to accept a man's attentions for the evening.

Some demon prompted her to continue goading her friend.

"I bet you'll back out again."

The stranger, seeing that Elsie was now smiling, hesitated no longer, but came towards her. She stood her ground with that tomboyish air of familiarity often found in girls who have no *arrière-pensée* of coquettishness.

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"Elsie, what are you doing?" said Victoria, moving off and expecting her friend to follow. She began to regret her imprudence, for she knew what strange and perilous consequences can follow an evening's casual acquaintance with a stranger.

But Elsie did not move. The stranger watched her. He saw her stand her ground, cool, unresentful, smiling invitingly, in spite of that candid air of hers, as he advanced. Thrusting his hand in his pocket, he felt for his knife.

Howard had shaved his moustache, which was why Victoria did not recognize him. In a few minutes he and Elsie were in the midst of the crowd, standing together in front of the booths. Then, to get away from the fair, they took to the quiet way of Richmond Walk, which runs along the Hamoaze in front of the ancient fortifications of Devonport.

"So after all," mused Victoria, left by herself, "Elsie is not so very different from the rest of us!"

Walking in the shade, the sailor was emboldened to put his arm round his companion's waist. They went down together towards the

beach where rocks covered with seaweed at low tide stood out among the pools.

Suddenly he made a movement to kiss the girl, but she turned her head rapidly so that instead of reaching her lips he found his mouth buried in her hair.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you're not wasting any time, are you?"

Evidently she did not take the matter seriously.

"Now be sensible," she said, as he renewed his attempt.

"All right; I'll be sensible."

They talked together, and as they talked a kind of intimacy grew between them. Howard told her of his youth, of his life as a sailor—a life not different from that of other sailors but which seemed to interest her because it was his. He would have liked to know something about his companion, something to add to what he knew already and kept to himself, about this girl whom he had come to love so wildly without disclosing his love and without letting her suspect it.

Then he remembered that his whole reason for being there was simply to learn what she

was worth. Here he was, beside her at last, and for such a purpose! He was troubled. He tried to banish his grim task from his mind. Why not abandon himself to the charm of the moment, act like a lover, look into her eyes and forget that he had come as a judge, perhaps an executioner.

"Do you mean to tell me," she was asking him, "that you've never loved anybody until now?"

"Only once."

"Who was it?"

"You."

And as she met this answer with an unbelieving smile, he reflected that he must pull himself up. He tried again to snatch a kiss.

"Let me go," she said, moving away.

She seemed really angry, but having recaptured her he, angry now too and determined, pressed her tightly against his heart. Still she struggled in his grasp to avoid his lips.

"Stop it! Enough! I'll scream!"

"Bah! Nobody would take any notice."

Doubts assailed him again. Was she holding him off coquettishly to strengthen his desire—or was she honestly good, inaccessible?

But the affair which had begun in jest looked likely to end in tears. For in a heated game like this there is a danger that the animal spirit in a man will sweep away all his resolutions not to overstep the mark. Brooding over the scene and dominating the two human wills, there was a spirit of cruel violence. They were entering on a struggle in which they might be carried despite themselves to desperate ends. Elsie was no longer content to repulse the man with a protest. She battled with a despairing fury, her face distorted, her hands pressing heavily upon him. Completely out of control, the sailor was on the point of knocking her down. His elbow struck her full in the face. Even her sharp cry of pain did not recall him to his senses. But at last she seemed to weaken. Her arms fell spent, exhausted, at her sides. Success seemed at hand.

Yet even in the heat of his desire fear racked him.

"No doubt," he thought, "she behaves like this with them all."

Steeling himself, he passed his hand over the knife in his pocket and awaited his opportunity.

Yet his sense of justice told him that he ought to make absolutely sure.

"Look here," he said, "let me have another kiss, a better one."

She was exhausted, half-conquered, sobbing. Their breath came laboured, their hearts beat wildly.

"Another kiss," he demanded, with a gesture that left no doubt as to his meaning.

Elsie understood. A shudder of revolt shook her. Mastering herself, she begged for her release.

"No, I tell you. Not you nor any other."

"What! Shall I be the first?"

"Never mind! Not you. Never you!"

A red mist came before his eyes. Forgetting his mission and obeying simply his instinct, he threw himself on her like a savage.

There was no semblance now of gallantry or of generosity. The conventions had gone by the board. He was the primitive male bounding from rock to rock after the female, and ready to shed blood to get her. Elsie fought despairingly, biting his neck and shoulder while her finger nails scratched savagely at his face. Finally she wrenched herself free, but turning,

slipped to her knees on the weed-covered rock, and dragging herself to her feet, slipped again.

Kneeling, she seized him by the arm. He snatched it away, and the moonlight shining on it revealed something to Elsie which made her knees tremble and her eyes grow dim. There was not a single finger on the hand. She stayed there kneeling, her eyes fixed on that pitiful stump. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came.

"Yes," said the man, "it's me. It's Howard, Donovan's friend."

But the girl still shuddered and drew back, overwhelmed at this living witness of the man's fierce passion. Here he had come, unknown to her, the man who for his love for her had risked his life. So it was true!

All her pride was conquered, only an inexpressible tenderness remained. Her heart leaped up and she held out her arms towards him.

But Howard, bowing his head like a criminal, made off into the dark.

"Where are you? Where are you?" she cried and cried again. But she stretched her

hands to the night in vain. Then on the sand, shining in the moonlight, she saw the knife.

"He's done with me! He doesn't love me! He came back only to be revenged for that ghastly fight, and then he didn't dare!"

It was at this moment that Victoria, who had been searching fearfully for her friend, came upon her. To her amazement she found Elsie alone.

"Well," she demanded, "where is he?"

But Elsie's unnatural pallor frightened her. "What in heaven's name have you done?" she asked.

"I hardly know. . . . He tried to kiss me and I fought him. This knife dropped out of his hands and he ran away."

Shocked and horror-struck, Victoria gave way to tears, and Elsie, spent, wept with her.

Then, "Let's get out," said Victoria, suddenly struck with fear, and taking Elsie's arm she led her back to the promenade and the lights. Quicker and quicker they went, as though they fled from mortal danger. They were almost running as they pushed through the Ha'penny Gate, and passers-by turned as they passed at the sound of their sobs.

CHAPTER V

ELSIE was deeply unsettled by her adventure. She fancied it a warning from on high. It was not so much the physical danger in which she had stood as the sudden flash of understanding that it was to experiences of this kind that her present existence exposed her. She was determined to change her way of life. But how? Where should she look for an ideal and a support? Love, which satisfied so many, had evidently no message for her. It was too deceitful to have power to hold her. She looked vainly for guidance, and the more she searched the sadder she became.

In the drab life of the English slums there are those among the submerged who lift up their heads suddenly because they think they have seen a light. They declare that they are "saved." For some the change is permanent. Others find themselves deceived, and faltering, sink back again to the mud.

A hundred little incidents which might once have passed unobserved seemed to bring home to Elsie at this time a sense of her own lack of harmony, the squalor of her surroundings

and her own personal misery. The need to find a new direction for her life became overpowering in its urgency.

One evening they brought home her step-mother in a hopeless state of intoxication, and when she had recovered her senses she tried to throw herself from the window. Elsie's father, the captain of a sea-trawler, was at sea. The old sea-dog could hardly be considered more edifying than his mate. Fat and jolly, Harry Farquhar had a way with women and he made the most of it. Elsie herself, born before his marriage, was a witness to his irregularities.

In defiance of all the proprieties, he had installed in his own house the attractive Dora Jenkins, whose husband, ignorant of his misfortune, was on the high seas. This and similar propensities provided food for the local gossips, who discussed it over their glasses and gave a sympathetic ear to the protests of a neighbour to whose daughter Farquhar had promised marriage in spite of being himself a married man. A glance at the young girl herself was sufficient to reveal that the courtship had not been fruitless.

Elsie made up her mind to meet the erring fisherman when he returned with his boat and to urge him to mend his ways. His boat had that moment returned from Start Bay and landed its load of fish amid the bustle of the quayside, after wrestling all night and all morning with the waves. Wearing his sea-boots, his jersey surmounted by large braces, and the inevitable fisherman's cap, Farquhar was setting off with his mate Bill Emmins and Turner, the Barbican fish salesman, to refresh his throat at Jacob's bar after having shouted himself hoarse through the megaphone. A short clay pipe was stuck in his mouth, and there was a smile in the corner of his eyes.

When Elsie, putting her hand on her "dad's" massive shoulder, explained her errand, he laughed in her face and wanted to know what had taken possession of her. She was free enough with the men herself, he told her. At least so it seemed when she stayed away from home for five days and nights on end three weeks before.

So Elsie decided to give it up and disappear again. It was given out in Kathleen Street that she had gone away with a "boy."

Left to herself, she reflected. Where would she find what she sought, the prop, the guide, something to soothe her soul, to inspire and comfort her? Men's love was a selfish business, an end quickly won, and leading too often not to splendour, but to violence and crime. Where should she turn? From her earliest days she had had around her nothing but misery and moral degradation. The bastard daughter of a man who had debauched the whole neighbourhood, whose drunken shouts had been the nightmare of her infant sleep, there had been no light to illumine her way. "I am lost," she cried despairingly. "I must sink with the rest in the mud."

There was one person to whom she could express something of what she felt, one of those benevolent women who enroll themselves among the "social workers" and, devoting themselves to the service of their fellows, strive to build a New Jerusalem in our own times. For some time Elsie followed her until she began to realize that with this admirable woman's works of charity there went a certain personal pride and self-satisfaction which chilled her.

"Why," Elsie asked her at last, "do you look

for recognition? If I was working for His sake in the way you do, I should be happy in serving and loving God without stooping to ask other people to say 'Thank you.' To do good deeds in the hope of recognition seems to me something different from real love."

They parted, and once again Elsie faced the problem. Where should she turn?

There were the churches, but in spite of their promise of life she found them cold. To find anything you had to take it in with you. It was no use to follow the docile crowd who went regularly to the church unless one carried about with oneself the aroma of love and righteousness.

She was coming to think that the peace of heart and mind that she was seeking was only to be found among those whose individual lives were virtuous and saintly. She dreamed of a life lived in common with a true Christian. It would be good to be one of those virtuous couples whose days seemed to pass as smoothly as a song and were one long homage to the Master. The processions of Salvationists on Sunday afternoons moved her to envy.

Then somebody said: "You ought to go and

see Billy Rodgers. He's a light in his neighbourhood."

"Thanks; I'll go and see him," she replied.

In the window of Billy's house she found a placard inscribed:

"Fellow workers! Spare a copper for one of yourselves, Billy Rodgers, who is in great need. Billy will remember your kindness and pray for you."

Rodgers explained to Elsie that a great number of dockyardees passed his house on their way to work. He himself had formerly been "in the yard," and on that account and because of his ill-health, which everybody knew about, he had found it a good idea to put this card in the window.

But Rodgers's father-in-law, who was present at this interview, denounced him as nothing but a waster who ought to be ashamed of himself. The only thing he had done was to be the father of twelve children and declare that he was the Lord's Anointed on account of his fecundity. And since, in order to give himself up to thanksgiving, he had abandoned all kinds of work except selling bootlaces outside the Conservative Club, his wife, who was expecting

her thirteenth baby, had to work for them all.

Rodgers contented himself with tapping his forehead to indicate that the poor old man was not quite right in his mind. Telling him to be quiet, he explained to Elsie that it was his mission to expound the Word. A Bible was on the table.

"Yes, I'm very poor," he said, "and it's true that I have twelve children and my wife is expecting another. That is why this man despises me."

He was anxious to improve Elsie's mind with a few verses of Scripture, but the girl declined to listen.

"You are making a great mistake," Rodgers insisted. "Just listen to these verses and what I've got to say about them. It will be words of gold." But as Elsie was preparing to go he made haste instead to ask "two bob" from her, which she gave him. It was all the money she had.

She went out sad at heart; the "Prophet" had no message. As she shut the door he opened the window and shouted after her:

"Any bootlaces?"

"No, thank you."

"I am beginning to think," she mused, "that most of those who pretend to be the Lord's own, make money out of it and make religion look ridiculous to other people."

As she had parted with her last florin she passed two days without food, walking about the streets. Outside the town she fell in with a man, who, in the hope of seducing her, gave her five pounds to get some clothes and go away with him. Part of the money she spent on others worse off than herself and on her friends. With the rest she bought herself some clothes and a pair of shoes of which she stood sadly in need, and then set off alone on the rough road towards Crownhill and the moors.

It was on the moors beyond Roborough that she was addressed by a stranger in clerical attire with a flat pastoral hat. And because she was pretty, and her new clothes of that simplicity that brings women near to Nature and lends them some of her magnificence, he thought her rich. Failing to understand a bitterly satirical remark of hers, he took her for a gentleman's wealthy daughter, and congratulated himself at having found her in his path. Being hungry

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for companionship, Elsie decided not to deceive him. He found her interesting, and she, with the naïve respect of simple natures for those whose dress or bearing suggests social or intellectual superiority, thought she had made a fortunate encounter.

They talked together and, far from displaying the austerity of tone which his dress might have led her to expect, he showed a lightness of touch and what appeared to Elsie a natural elegance and easy grasp of the problems which weigh upon less fortunate and less gifted people.

It was easy to believe this morning that the Maker of all things, who had made Nature so pleasant, could not possibly desire His creatures to be unfriendly and morose. The morning was clear and charming with a fresh moorland breeze. Save for Elsie and her companion, the place was so completely deserted as to seem forgotten of humanity.

In a little while the man yielded to the influence of the silence and the solitude. Drawing close to Elsie, he said:

“Would you think it wrong if we were to

kiss, up here, in secret, out of sight of the world——?”

The question startled Elsie. She was a little shocked to find his thoughts running so soon in this direction. She reflected, however, that he had no doubt spoken in this fashion to test her. She answered:

“Why, if a kiss is loving and true, should it be offered to the eyes of all the world? Anything that is really deep and sincere must be beautiful. My soul is thirsty for some marvel that will be born out of silence, and from silence take strength and life.”

Delighted at being so completely understood, her companion hoped to take advantage of her consent at once. Elsie stopped him with a gesture, and went on: “But, on the other hand, why should I blush for a kiss if I give it freely and in the joy of my heart? I’m a Protestant, proud of my liberty to judge for myself, and I’m answerable to none but God.”

At these words he became more persuasive than ever and would have put his arms round her. But again she checked him. “Not now,” she said.

Next, in order to persuade her he outlined his

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ideas on the delicate problems which appeared to be occupying the girl's mind. His creed, as he explained it, appeared to be a purely utilitarian one, perfect in its good taste, admirably adapted to serve immediate interests, free from all vulgar fanaticism, but equally free from idealism. It was broad and tolerant enough to find a place for everything, even to agnosticism or blank negation. He had an indulgent smile for ideas of a future life which he appeared to regard as a bogey which it might be salutary to flourish in front of people from time to time. The only thing that really mattered was to find some means of keeping humanity under discipline, a flock to be charmed at times with songs, and scared at other times with frowns into good behaviour. The directors of this process in charge of the various places of worship were the real pillars of the social order, keeping it stable and keeping the poor and insurgent in their places, employing charity as a comfortable weapon against disobedience and restlessness.

"It would be a fine thing if we could work together on these lines," he exclaimed, "especially as you are blessed with opportunity

through the possession of this world's goods."

Elsie reflected, not for the first time, that nothing was rarer than sincerity. Evidently he was interested only in the fortune that he mistakenly credited her with and in the passing attraction of her good looks.

"If only some of you who are well to do could see, at close quarters, the disgrace and the misery of the slums," he went on, waxing more eloquent still.

"I know all about the disgrace and misery of the slums," Elsie replied.

As he did not regard this assurance seriously, she added:

"I was joking just now. I can assure you that, as a matter of fact, I am very poor."

But as he still thought she was joking, she said: "Come to Plymouth in three days' time and ask for me at 12 Kathleen Street."

He kept the appointment because he was intrigued, and he flattered himself that he was being put to a test from which he would be able to emerge with profit to himself. But he found the room was indeed as poor as she had said.

As he entered she rose, and coming towards

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him tenderly, she invited him to take her in his arms.

"Now that you have come to me," she said, "we can have that secret kiss of which we talked."

But he looked at the poverty of the room and realized that even if Elsie were good looking there was no particular profit to be derived from her and she might easily become an encumbrance.

"Let us be serious," he said, and taking a book from his pocket he began to read aloud.

"But what's the use of being good?" Elsie interrupted him. "The other day when you thought I was rich you told me there was no hell. If death is just going to sleep, what does it matter?"

The reverend gentleman concluded that there was nothing to be gained by prolonging his visit. Elsie made no effort to detain him, but resumed her own musings on the problems of life. God, she reflected, ought to be thought of in silence and solitude. Had she not seen what scum came to the surface when people began to talk about Him? He was only to be found in the obscure depths of the soul. To

mention His name was a profanation. Had He a name? Names, after all, were invented by men. What desolation! "God is so high that I can never reach Him!"

She felt that she could no longer address words of love to the Almighty as she had formed the habit of doing, and that fierce and imperious need of tenderness that had always obscurely possessed her suffered from this self-abnegation. Worse still, she could no longer feel a reason for little acts of sacrifice and consideration for others. She began to suspect that the Almighty had no particular interest in her actions.

"What shall I do?" she moaned. "I have tried everything, and everything eludes me. Yet how can I fall back now, when so often I have nearly attained my dream of a better world? How content myself, when I know there is something higher than this daily life of ours?"

And a voice within whispered: "But have you really accepted life as a child does? You have refused love and the simple friendship of the people around you. Have you not turned your back on the humble religion of

simple folk to chase the will-o'-the-wisp of your own vague ideal?"

She reflected a long time on these things. Then "Why torment myself?" she said at last. "Why not take things as they are, happy one day and wretched the next, cold to-day and burning with passion to-morrow? I seem to be made that way."

Thus thinking, she determined to make an end of regrets and go on living in the old way, with her faults and her easy virtues, her impetuosity that pushed her now towards good and now towards evil—a decision most reasonable since that was the life she was born to and because life itself is only one long problem of which none of us by our own conduct can alter the data any more than we can discover the solution.

CHAPTER VI

ELSIE'S peace of mind was disturbed afresh about this time by something which filled her first with bewilderment and then with increasing fear.

She first became aware of it as a strange noise rather like the rolling of a light wagon along the road. At regular intervals it was punctuated by three heavy blows on the roadway, as though a trio of heavy instruments had been brought down together on the stones; three heavy blows alternating with three slow steps dragged along the ground. There was something profoundly disquieting about the systematic repetition of these sounds at the same hour time after time, in the unbroken stillness of night. It had all the appearance of a deliberate and ingeniously designed plan of torment.

After a time Elsie came to wait in an agony of suspense for the sounds that she knew would occur infallibly at the appointed hour. Ears strained and heart beating wildly, she would lie night after night waiting in agony for the horrible familiar sound. At last, one night, her curiosity mastering her fear, she jumped out of

bed, opened the window and looked out into the street. There in the dim light she saw three limping shadows—three men, each with a wooden leg. As they passed the house it seemed to her that they stopped to look up at the windows.

Elsie found herself becoming gradually obsessed by the idea of this apparition repeated nightly with the regularity of clockwork. There was no explanation of it save that she possessed in some way the doubtful and undesired faculty of attracting towards herself the mute and questioning gaze of those three pairs of eyes.

Apparently they came to satisfy themselves that the house was still there, and without a word they passed on, pushing a small barrow in front of them.

Three men, three heavy thuds on the roadway, three measured dragging steps and the group moved on; the sounds grew fainter, melted into silence and remained in the memory only—a memory haunted by the nightmare that was to return at the same hour the next night and the next, inevitably, and for no human reason.

* * * * *

THE SORROWS OF ELSIE

It was at nightfall in Frankfort Street that I myself saw the pathetic spectacle of three young men, each of whom had lost a leg, walking along with the same movements and the same swaying of the shoulders, making their way towards Stonehouse and pushing a child's perambulator on which they had mounted a street organ.

The sight gripped my heart. I recognized them for three sailors, victims of their calling, and something moved me to hasten my steps to have a word with them. I recognized Graham Howard and Patrick Donovan. The third man was a stranger to me.

We stopped at a street corner and the stranger introduced himself as Josiah Stevens. He told me he had been a stoker for ten years and had lost his leg in a boiler explosion.

"They took me to the hospital at Southsea," he added, "and there I met these chaps. We all went under our operation and got well together. So as we all came out on the same day, we clubbed together and bought this musical instrument. It only plays one tune," he added with a grimace.

"And you chaps?" I asked the others.

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For answer they pointed to the stumps of their left arms and to their wooden legs.

"What!" I cried. "Both of you? An arm and a leg!"

"Well," said Donovan, "Howard's my best friend."

"Donovan's a real pal," said Howard.

It appeared that when Howard returned without having executed vengeance, and reported that Elsie Farquhar was really worth dying for, there was only one thing to do—resume the duel.

And while Stevens in the hope of raising coppers, ground out of the tuneless instrument its solitary air, the two men monotonously chanted, beating time with their wooden legs and holding up their mutilated hands:

One finger, two fingers,
The third finger falls.
Now for the middle finger,
After that the thumb,
The blood runs out from the stumps.

After which, each lifting up the stump of his left arm, they continued their *macabre* hymn, of which the conclusion ran something like this:

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Now you must hack the wrist,
Never make a sound.
Not a shudder, not a tear.
One more strong blow,
Off comes a leg!

"We were ready to kill each other in earnest that time," said Howard, trying to smile.

"Still, we got over it," said Donovan, "because they took us to the hospital at Southsea where we had three months with this hero here who's told you his story."

"Donovan," I said, "how pale you are!"

"I shan't live long, mate," he answered. "My only trouble is that I can't go back to Ireland and kiss my old mother for the last time."

A few days later I was able to get a berth for Donovan on one of my cousin's boats to Cork. From there he would be able to make his way to his native Connemara.

* * * * *

I met Elsie Farquhar at Coxside one evening a little later. It was in the "Star Inn," a low-class public-house frequented by the sailors of the two hemispheres. She was with Edna Clark, Lottie Patterson, and Phyllis Jones, known as the Nigger's Wife.

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I had hardly entered when I caught sight of Elsie. Mabel Reeves said to me:

"That's the girl you want to see; that's Elsie."

Elsie noticed that I was looking at her.

"Hullo, boy!" she said. "Are you going to dance with me?"

But I was unable to answer for a moment. Something in her appearance silenced me. She gave an indefinable impression of having lost her way. It is hard to find words for the feeling I had that she was at once desperate and gay. Her gaiety was artificial. It was a sort of intoxication. The forced merriment of her words was in too violent contrast with the coldness of her mouth and with the pallor of her lips. . . . Yet those lips surely would be desirable. . . .

"Well, boy," she repeated, "can you Boston?"

"No," I replied, smiling. "I don't want to dance. I'd rather talk to you about that nice boy Pat Donovan who is dying of love for you. I've been looking for you several days. That's why I'm here this evening."

She looked at me for a moment and then re-

plied in a manner that seemed to me undeniably sincere:

“Donovan? I don’t remember.”

We went out together and I could not help thinking aloud.

“Fancy a girl being able to tell me like that that she doesn’t remember a man she’s kissed and made love to. It’s strange.”

Elsie smiled and there was something in her smile that I did not understand. We wandered together for a little on the quay, and I swear that as I walked there was something in her proximity that brought me very near forgetting poor Donovan and his modest request, with which I was charged, to see the girl once more.

Elsie told me that she had seen me often in Southside Street. Our conversation took on an increasingly emotional tinge. Yes; it was easy to imagine a man loving this strange girl with all his soul.

“Hold my arm tighter,” she said to me in a trembling voice, which indicated that she had no longer control over her feelings.

A ray of moonlight fell across our path. From one of the side alleys a cat walked lazily

across in front of us and stopped to rub voluptuously against her dress. Quite near us there were voices, but they did not exist for us; they seemed far off and unreal.

Elsie turned her face up towards mine and then she seemed to be taken with faintness and stumbled. She was crying. I spoke to her, but got no answer.

"Elsie!" I said. "What is the matter?"

A sob was her only answer, and then I heard her say, under her breath:

"Oh, why must I be just a woman—an ordinary woman?"

CHAPTER VII

TWICE a day, when a twinkling of bells announced the dairyman's cart, Dora Jenkins went down to the door to get her half-pint of milk. On the way back she never failed to stop before Mrs. Farquhar's door on the first floor and listen at the keyhole. If she was satisfied that Mrs. Farquhar was not at home she would knock timidly at the door and Elsie would open to her.

"Gone out?" asked Dora.

"Yes; she's out," Elsie would reply.

"How is he?"

"Father's no better; would you like to see him?"

Then Elsie would go out and leave Dora to approach the bed on tiptoe and look anxiously at the invalid. He hardly acknowledged her glance, apparently indifferent to everything, his only sound an occasional whimper.

Before he had been taken with this illness—a rapid consumption—Farquhar, a big rosy-cheeked man, with a grey beard and a face always lighted up with a good-humoured smile, had passed for a gay dog with remarkable fas-

cination for the womenfolk. He was very much wasted now and his gay manners were only a memory. So was the love he had once had for the anxious woman for whom now, with the profound egotism sometimes found in the moribund, he had scarcely a glance.

Her visit over, Dora returned to her room and remarked to her husband: "Our neighbour Farquhar is no better."

Skipper of a cargo-boat trading in Australia and New Zealand, Jenkins had returned after several months' absence to find his wife settled down in a new house. A man of few attachments and not given to mixing with his neighbours, he knew nothing of Farquhar. Even on his ship he was much the same, a taciturn man without friends. His emotional needs were satisfied by the great and almost blind affection he felt for his rather flabby wife, the blonde Dora, with her very white face and very red lips, Dora, who always wore a dressing-gown as though she had just got out of bed, and who contrived to look at the same time sensual and sanctimonious with her moist lips and the black rings under the eyes.

Dora was evidently interested in Farquhar,

and as Jenkins knew that landsmen had their own ideas which were often impenetrable to him and it was better anyhow to be on friendly terms with one's neighbours, he listened sympathetically to the news of the sick man whom he had never seen, but whose name had become very familiar to him since his return.

After tea one evening he went for a stroll in Exeter Street, the picturesque main thoroughfare of the fishing quarter. It was always animated towards evening, when traveling musicians mingled their noises with those of the public-houses and penny gaffs, and, here and there, street-corner orators managed to dominate the general tumult.

Jenkins, with his clean-shaven sunburnt face and his navy blue suit, looked a fine specimen of the British seaman. As he strolled past a sweet shop three girls passed him, one of them Elsie Farquhar.

"Hullo, captain," she said cheekily. "You out here, looking so smart and without your good lady. I always thought you were one of the steady-going ones."

Jenkins bit his lip, rather shocked at being

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addressed in such a free fashion by a young girl in the open street. He was instinctively on the defensive as though the Evil One in person had had the audacity to try to tempt him. A strict teetotaller, and a Nonconformist of the narrower sort, Jenkins was very intolerant of all scandal and incapable of seeing a joke. He regarded life as one long trial in which there was no room for laughter, grace or beauty.

Elsie found a new stimulus in his expression of disgust.

"Come," she said, still teasing, "at least you can take one of these to remember me by," and she held out a bag of sweets.

Jenkins refused politely.

"Pity you don't like sweets," said Elsie. "I didn't mean any harm. But take us to the pictures. We three poor girls want to enjoy ourselves."

Peals of laughter from the others greeted Elsie's pleasantry. But Jenkins replied dryly:

"I can't. I have to go home."

"Jealous?"

"Not at all. I'm fond of the missus, that's all."

"O Lord!"

The sailor was struck by the manner of the exclamation. What did the girl mean?

He looked at her, puzzled, this beautiful creature of twenty with her innocent expression of face a little sad under its forced gaiety. It lighted up now and again with an evident sincerity behind its habitual mask of effrontery.

"Listen," she said. "I hope I shan't upset you, but I'm a funny sort of girl, I am, and since you've come home I've been watching you and thinking things."

"Really?" He didn't understand. What did she want? Why had she stopped him? A married man gains nothing by listening to the chatter of a hussy. Getting impatient, he said:

"You must excuse me. I must go. My wife is waiting for me."

"She's waiting for you?" repeated Elsie slowly, and, in a rather shaky voice she added: "Are you sure of that?" Then she told him that for two years her father had been Dora's lover and that was why Dora had come to live in their house.

"Mrs. Farquhar knows all about it," she

added, "but she doesn't mind. I thought myself it would be better to warn you."

Jenkins bit his lips until they almost bled.

Elsie, looking at him, came to the opinion that this pig-headed man would hear nothing against his wife. It had cost her a good deal to open her mouth for these revelations, so evidently untimely and so badly received, and she added, in a mocking tone, to indicate that henceforth these things did not interest her:

"That's all. No ill-feeling, I hope?"

"Not at all."

"So long then. A pleasant evening at home."

And she went off laughing.

Jenkins turned towards home and, as he drew near to Kathleen Street, the ground seemed to rock beneath his feet. He went up the stairs four at a time and pushed open the door of his room. Dora was not there. His angry voice, calling her, frightened the cat into a rapid retreat from the room. But there was no response. He went downstairs to the first floor where the Farquhars lived, seized by this time with one of those furies that will sometimes overtake the calmest natures.

His rage was not against Dora. He had not

thought for a moment of accusing her. Women, he knew, were frail creatures, though he had always thought his own wife above suspicion and set her on a pedestal. On his return she had always greeted him with caresses that seemed to emphasize how necessary he was to her happiness. The one to blame was the stranger who had profited by his absence to seduce this lonely woman. His should be the punishment.

But how should he be punished? What would fit his crime? "We shall see," muttered Jenkins.

At that moment the door opened slowly and Jenkins stepped back. A man stood there in his night-shirt, and it was the man he sought. But before Jenkins could make a movement or utter a word Farquhar had fallen at his feet, vomiting blood.

The noise of the fall brought Mrs. Farquhar to the room, to find her husband stretched on the floor and apparently dying. With her neighbour's help she lifted the sick man on to his bed and Jenkins watched him while she went for the doctor.

It was night-time now and there was no

light in the room. Jenkins threw himself into a chair close to the culprit whom, just now, he had been ready to strangle with his own hands. He sat there sobbing convulsively, oblivious of his surroundings, until he was recalled to them by the sound of answering sobs, louder than his own, from the other side of the door. On the landing outside Dora too was giving audible expression to her grief.

He got up and walked out, passing without a word the woman who crouched against the door. Going to his room he gathered together a few of his belongings and went out of the house.

An hour later the whole neighbourhood knew that Jenkins had left his wife.

* * * * *

Dora seemed hardly to notice her husband's departure. She had lived only for Farquhar. Five years of happiness with Jenkins counted for nothing. If vice, if infidelity, ever deserved the passing tribute of a sigh there was certainly something moving in this desperate love of hers for the self-centered and callous man who had caused her ruin, and who at

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death's door was ready to take his departure without even giving her a thought.

To the surprise of every one Farquhar lingered for several weeks, and the unhappy Dora continued her journeys up and down the stairs to inquire after him.

Mrs. Farquhar, a little dark woman with bright flashing eyes, foul-mouthed when in drink—as she usually was—terrorized the pale Dora, who fled when she approached. The situation had its comic aspect, especially as it was notorious that the outraged wife had no real ill-feeling against her rival. Under the genial influence of gin she had a generous tolerance for the weaknesses of human nature. And this artificial aid to eloquence had become increasingly potent since her husband had gone from bad to worse and the power of the purse had reverted to her. The publicans of the district at whose houses night after night she was in glory, could have supplied interesting information on that point.

She retailed her conjugal misfortunes to all and sundry, dragging Dora through the mud with a picturesqueness of language which created bursts of laughter. Being of a cheerful

disposition she ended by joining in the mirth herself. She was not inclined to invoke the misdeeds of her husband as an excuse for her own disorders. There had been times when she had wept for his faults and her own, but they were past. She had become, as she put it, hic-coughing a little, an optimist. She faced the events of life calmly, ready at any moment to defend herself against it with her own rich and flowing store of Billingsgate.

What made her disdainful renunciation of marital privileges remarkable was the fact that she was still a pleasant-looking woman. Her features, swarthy and irregular, mitigated the redness of her nose. Her expression was at times almost gracious, and her wit was undeniable.

At last the news went round that the skipper was dead, and on that occasion Mrs. Farquhar by common consent surpassed herself in the matter of alcoholic refreshment. Everything nevertheless went off quite correctly. The widow was represented among the floral tributes by a wreath of natural flowers, the crew of the boat sent a very presentable wreath, and there was a third from the Temperance Society

of which the deceased was a member—a touch of grim humour which was not lost on the bereaved spouse.

“Oh, these sailors! They’re all the same,” declared Mrs. Farquhar the evening of the funeral at the “Ship Inn.” “They’re a gay lot, always after the skirts!

“I don’t say I shall miss the old man, but I know somebody upstairs who’s doing a weep on her own.” She jerked her thumb, with a mischievous grin, in the imaginary direction of Dora’s room. “She’d have given a lot to give the skipper a last kiss. She’d have given a lot to close his eyes, and fancy! she offered his girl a pair of new sheets for the laying-out.”

* * * * *

Dora had not been allowed in the death-chamber, but she questioned Elsie eagerly about the old man’s last moments.

“Elsie dear,” she demanded, “didn’t he say anything? What were his last words?”

“He said a lot about the soup. He said it wasn’t agreeing with him.”

“And what else? Elsie *dear*, what else did he say?”

"He talked about when he was a child in Appledore and about his mother. And sometimes he thought he was on his boat, the *Dolly Green*."

"But surely he said something else?"

"No!"

"Nothing about me?"

"Nothing about you."

Then she collapsed, the luckless wretch who had sacrificed her life for him.

The next day she wept again in the doorway, looking out at the stormy rain-swept sea which the old skipper would never sail again.

Elsie alone tried to comfort Dora Jenkins. She felt sad at heart herself, but she hid her emotion and declared herself without regrets.

"Why should I miss him? . . . He's better out of it. . . . We're all suffering through him. There's my stepmother nothing but a drunkard, you're a ruined woman, and I'm what he made me, a bastard and only born to get into trouble. . . . The other day," and her voice became faint, "just to pass the time, I tried it on with your husband. He loves you, Dora. Why didn't you treat him straight?"

"But it's a big thing, after all, a man dead and none of us more upset than if it was a dog. No real sorrow, no real pity, not a single gentle thought. It ought to make us pull ourselves together and decide on a new life, but it does nothing of the kind.

"I feel sometimes that I just drift along like a fool without knowing anything. If only we could have something in our hearts to reverence, to look up to; something that we knew was good without ever needing to speak of it.

"I'm worried, Dora. . . . I'd like to go away and say a prayer by myself, oh! a prayer that nobody would know of and nobody could take from me. Oh, how I dream of escaping out of all this mud and slime!"

She spoke with a strange exaltation, and Dora heard her with the uneasiness which we sometimes feel face to face with poets and madmen. But for the twentieth time the infatuated woman seized Elsie's arm and asked again:

"What did he say?"

Night fell on the town and on the sea. The lights of the port glistened through the falling rain, the boats rested at anchor, black and mysterious. Only the "pub" assaulted the

silence with a medley of sounds, and rising above them could be heard the shrill declamations of Mrs. Farquhar:

"Pair of sheets indeed! To the devil with your sheets, I say. . . . No thank you, madam. I know where to put my hand on a couple of quid the old man had laid by and I'm going to drink the lot. I gave him a good funeral all the same.

" 'He'll have a lovely coffin.' That's what I said to that baggage. And he won't be leaving it. I *don't* think. D'ye think I'd bury him in an orange box?

" 'No fear!' I says. 'You can clear out, there's nothing doing. Keep your sheets, my lady. Muck, I call you, you and your likes!'"

Elsie shuddered.

The wind moaned on, sweeping the drizzle from the windows and the housetops.

"Are you sure," pleaded Dora, "that he didn't say a word about me?"

"Nothing. Not a word. . . . Oh, leave me alone, Dora! You make me tired. You love a man and *she* loves drink. I don't love either. I don't know what I *do* love. But sometimes I dream of something really good and noble.

Do you know what I mean? I don't get it clear myself, but I think I see it best when I look up at the sky and the clouds or out to sea, right out there, a long way out, a long way up.

"Then I want to go straight out. I'd like to walk right out through the country, walking on and on, just living on roots or blackberries and singing to myself all the things I've got in my mind."

"Elsie, you frighten me," said Dora.

"Bah!"

On the horizon the beam from the lighthouse shone and vanished. The quay was deserted. One house was quieter than the rest, the house of the dead man, which everybody had forsaken. Next door was the noisy bar where the clatter of voices and of laughter made the windows rattle. Meanwhile the wind sighed unceasingly over the melancholy harbour-town. How many other such places are there, dim clusters of lights dotted along the coasts. Out at sea they seem to beckon to us. But when we reach them they are all alike—the homes of folly, of tears for the living and forgetfulness of the dead.

Part II

GOOD AND EVIL

CHAPTER I

MOVING away from the center of the town, up the Tavistock Road, one comes to brighter skies and clearer atmosphere. Here is a larger existence which is reflected in the smiling faces of the passers-by. On the first slopes of Crownhill the street widens, and the pleasant solid houses are set in a framework of green. Comfort is everywhere apparent, and the well-made tennis courts testify to the importance of sport and recreation. In France one finds the dwellings of the poor out in the doleful suburbs. Here, on the other hand, it is the rich men's houses that stand away above the turmoil in the gracious atmosphere of a semi-rustic quarter. Wide horizons stretch away on every side. One tastes the first sweet breath of the English country-side.

A turn to the left towards Stuart Road, which leads to Devonport by way of the Technical School, reveals the great spaces where the speculative builder has run up rows of streets at right angles to each other, with houses all exactly alike. These are the homes of hundreds of families belonging to that frugal lower middle

class, loyal, virtuous and methodical, which is often called the backbone of the country. They live in these monotonous houses aping the ease and comfort of their betters, in a false appearance of prosperity, which reflects a touching ideal of respectability and a childish anxiety to be different from the shopkeepers and the working-classes. All through the week the tramways bear these industrious employees and minor officials to their drab offices. On Sundays, attired in their best, they present themselves ceremoniously at church, and all along the streets, plunged in a heavy Sabbath somnolence, invisible pianos vibrate to the strains of Wesleyan hymns.

Let us stop for a moment in front of these houses. . . . Here and there a discreet window card bearing the inscription "Lodgings" or "Apartments" proclaims a need to augment the family revenue by subletting a room or taking in a lodger. But above all, appearances must be saved. Hence the spotless cleanliness of the entrances, where servants in white aprons are forever polishing up the brass, and hence the ostentation, often deceptive, of the front room. In the window, some object of family

pride is offered to the admiration of passers-by, an aspidistra, a sporting trophy, or, under a glass case, the naval or military medals of an ancestor. Such details, the proper study of the moralist, are a pleasure to any observant mind.

A window of one of these houses, that differs in no detail from its neighbours, displays a card, resting against a stand and bearing the words:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

For all the simplicity of the message it needs a real taste for the things of the soul to pause in front of it and offer more than a shrug of the shoulders. What religious crank, or impostor perhaps, has put up that sign; and with what purpose? Is it to make himself out to be better than he is, or is it in the faint hope of edifying those that pass by? Is he sincere, and even so, what can he gain?

But let us draw a little nearer. Within these walls all is quiet, no children's noise, no piano, no sign of life. One would say it was the quiet home of some lonely widower, a place of sorrow. The room contains no ornaments and no flowers, nothing but the few words of that in-

scription so insignificant in appearance, but vibrant and full of eloquence to those who have ears to hear.

Let us spare a few moments and glance into the light and shadow of the room. In a moment the eyes discern the figure of a man, remote from the vain agitations of the outside world, walking softly over the thick felt carpet as though anxious not to disturb the rest of some dear spirits that still haunt his memory; a grave gray-bearded little man whom Melancholy seems to have marked for her own, but in whose eyes there yet burns the bright flame of some interior fire. And now and then, as if urged by his inward exaltation, he moves towards the window, and hidden in the folds of the curtain, looks out to see if that silent and pathetic exhortation in front of the glass has not found somewhere an echo, if among the crowd of strangers who pass and repass none is disposed to listen, none to understand and be a secret friend.

“Just one sign. . . . A silent appeal, but so clear. . . . Among these impenetrable shades that follow one another on the pavement, showing one only their outer forms and hiding their

souls, who will hear this cry from the depths of my heart? Which one shall I recognize as *one of His people?*”

On one of his journeys to the window, the old man saw a young woman standing motionless on the other side of the glass. She seemed to be pondering the inscription, and, holding his breath, he moved nearer to the pane.

She seemed unlike the rest, this girl, unlike the many who saw without seeing and went their way with indifference. Had she been touched by the inner meaning of this thought?

He felt that sacred joy which comes to the creator of a work too high for the mass of his fellows, when he surprises a young enthusiast in mute ecstasy before it. Unforgettable moment! Below the frontiers of the individual self a sort of communion is established between two beings who share a common faith though perhaps they will never exchange a word. It is comparable to the moment when the traveler on a desert island sees the footprints of a fellow-creature in the sand.

She stood there still. She was a daughter of the people, which perhaps was why, feeling herself something of an intruder in this middle-

class neighbourhood, she seemed to wish to make herself less conspicuous. For a moment the man on the other side of the glass feared that he might scare her away, but she was too absorbed to notice him. Slowly he opened the door and very softly said:

"So you see what that means; you too have heard the call?"

Then he opened the door wider.

Elsie felt instinctively that she need not introduce herself or explain her presence. She had a sense that she was expected and she did not doubt for a moment that she would be understood, that already this man had heard her unuttered avowal: "I am weary, I am broken, I am crushed. But I seek a ray of hope, a light in darkness, something that will speak secretly to my heart and calm my torment."

What she said was, pointing to the text: "I read that as I passed and I've been thinking that He spoke those words for me."

From her words he was able to gauge the distress of her soul. He knew she must have suffered intensely to grasp so completely the beauty of the Word.

He asked no explanations, neither whence

she came, nor if she had sinned, stolen or blasphemed. One thing sufficed, that she too had felt ardently the call to a better life; she too was thirsty for the good, the noble, the great. She had felt the breath of the spirit. Amid the blind unresponsiveness of the crowds a rare prodigy had occurred, there stood before him one who had responded to the mysterious appeal and who thought as he did himself.

Looking at her more carefully and, seeing that she was poor and lonely and no doubt abandoned, he remembered that it was necessary to live in this world, and that the body needs sustenance as well as the soul.

"I understand," he said, after a moment of reflection. "I can do nothing for you myself, for I am an old man whom death seems to have overlooked. But go on your way and I will give you the name of some one who will know better than I how to help you, some one to whom you can talk. Knock at the door of Mrs. Strangford, Clarence House, Stoke, and tell her who sent you and everything you feel."

Elsie left him full of unwonted enthusiasm and confidence. She knew she would not be deceived. "I have found it! I have found

it!" she mused, quickening her steps. She felt that a new life awaited her, was presenting itself at her door. What had seemed impossible had taken on actuality and was here at hand. She felt herself the possessor of some strange and precious password whose magic power would help her henceforth to escape the temptations and betrayals of daily life, to avoid the pitfalls that lead to the abyss of shameful things. Henceforward, buoyed up by an imperturbable confidence, she would go on her way firm-footed and untroubled amid a wicked humanity, and, her soul at peace, her heart serene and joyous, she would see herself welcomed as a sister at every step of the way by brethren vowed to a common ideal.

After a long walk, Elsie found herself in Stoke in front of an avenue of fine-looking white houses, facing on the railway line, where, between the thick leafage of the acacias, one could watch the trains gliding swiftly along towards London or towards Cornwall. She stopped in front of Clarence House.

Up to now she had never been in so fine-looking a house; these people, she reflected, must be very comfortably off. It caused her no

discomfort, however; for an irresistible conviction told her she would be welcome. The woman who opened the door to her might still be called young, and her expression was full of frankness. Elsie said simply: "I have come from Mr. Osborne."

The lady smiled gently and, making a sign to her to enter, showed her into the drawing-room.

She too, asked no questions, but looking into Elsie's eyes, she held out her hand. By that look and gesture alone, acting on her quick intuition, she made the young girl feel that although she was a stranger she would be received like a child coming home after a long absence.

It was as though from that moment a veil was drawn over Elsie's past. She seemed to be dreaming. Gone were her miseries, and yielding by instinct to a sympathy that was incapable of deceiving her, she abandoned herself confidently to her new friend. And when an affectionate little boy, mingling his prattle with his mother's voice, took his stand at Elsie's side she felt herself brought closer into contact with this gracious dwelling where she had at last discovered a resting-place. A little later,

Mrs. Strangford took her to the room she was to occupy in a household where she would live in future on a footing of perfect equality with the rest.

Then they both set themselves cheerfully to prepare the evening meal, for it was drawing near the time when Mrs. Strangford's husband returned from his daily work. On his arrival he showed no sign of disapproval at finding Elsie there, but let it be seen that in his wife's place he would have acted just as she did.

He shared that grave and reserved manner of speech of hers that commanded respect at once. Impossible to associate him with anything wrong or unworthy. By intangible signs, impossible to analyse, he gave that impression of a sort of interior discipline which Elsie had already fancied she felt in certain people. . . .

Here and there, in fact, in this sunless country, one meets people who stand apart from the common run, who seem to have their regard fixed always on the heavens, to be on familiar terms with what is noble and pure, and speak as the muffled echoes of a higher voice. It may be an attitude, the result of morose meditations or puritanical breeding, since religion itself is

sometimes a freak of nature, an interest, a kind of "sport."

Yet about her host there was nothing unnatural or forced. He knew how to laugh and to be pleasantly human. He was not one of those gloomy bigots who carry their "credo" like a cross and walk towards salvation with a rope round their throats, dressed in hair-shirts, or like condemned men being led to the scaffold. So completely was he the counterpart of his wife that their community in their beloved doctrine seemed to have rendered them both mentally and spiritually inseparable.

Elsie asked herself what this rule of life might be. Twice a discreet allusion by the master of the house to a certain meeting-house caused her to prick up her ears. She understood that Mrs. Strangford belonged to the Strict Brethren.

After tea, a young neighbour came in, Ada Haydee, who apparently visited every day. She suggested that they should all take a walk to Camel's Head. Elsie was too tired for such a party, so Mr. Strangford went out alone with Ada, while Elsie and Mrs. Strangford rested and chatted in the garden.

THE SORROWS OF ELSIE

What peace! The contrast of such an existence with the hell in which she had lived up to now, gave Elsie the feeling of being in an unreal world, so fragile that the least shock might destroy it. But so absurd a thought could not endure. One felt on the contrary that this house was the sure refuge of order, of continuity, of all that must last. To strengthen this reassuring impression she had only to lift her eyes to Mrs. Strangford, and see a guide and supporter in that woman, whose chaste beauty, so alien from all foolish coquetry, inspired thoughts of holiness. The dominating note of her personality was the confidence inspired by an equanimity so imperturbable as to make one ask with surprise whether it was the equanimity of satisfied possession or of peaceful resignation.

Sent here by the recluse in Stuart Road, Elsie waited for the word from Mrs. Strangford which would explain all this hospitality and kindness and link it up with an exhortation to believe in something or to live rightly. "Now is the time," she would tell herself, but Mrs. Strangford kept silent. The days passed and still she said nothing. Elsie, in the puzzled

ardour of her desire, would say: "She will speak to me later on." But illumination came gradually, so that in the end she found it quite natural that Mrs. Strangford should not speak, that she should offer no explanations. Elsie remarked too that it caused her no surprise to be received here in this fashion, for all the world as though this house had been for her and was her very own. In fact her only real cause for surprise came to be that she had not always lived there.

When they retired for the night, Elsie returned to her own room, and left the door unfastened; for she had been made to understand that here all the doors were open, like the faces of those whose lives know nothing of shadows. Before undressing she sat down and reflected on her new condition, and felt reassured. She had, too, a strange impression which increased from moment to moment. It was indefinable and impossible to analyse, a definite perception that seemed to disengage itself from these new surroundings in which she had been developing for the last few hours, a sensation as of contact, as though a hand were laid upon her shoulder. For a moment she

almost started. Yet there was nobody at her side.

She opened her eyes and looked around her.

It was as though there, quite close to her, some being, some object, impossible to perceive, although the room was flooded with light, passed from door to door like a breath, disappearing and reappearing, always intangible, present and absent at once, and all the time invisible. And over all there was a silence, a silence that seemed in some way supernatural.

Elsie listened more intently. There is no such thing as perfect silence. There are always noises that you expect to be able to hear if you listen feverishly. But no, there was still nothing. Only the same appeal, always mute and yet so distinct, and which she was alone in hearing: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden."

The house, in truth, appeared to be haunted, but that did not trouble her. There was simply the intuition of some friendly and mysterious presence, amiable, comforting and tender, clear and gracious, airy as the song of an Æolian harp.

Not until later was she able to unravel, little

by little and very confusedly, the nature of this inexplicable phenomenon. At first she had to be content merely to see and observe.

What overshadowed all else in this household into which she had been admitted was an astonishing atmosphere of moral purity, of serene religion. Where could one find a holier household than this, where every act, every thought, was a homage unto the Lord, although His name was never uttered?

She was struck, too, by the realization of her own calm, her own sense of peace.

The fever had all gone. She had left behind her the squalor of those distant haunts where vice walks openly and corrupts all who approach. No longer she heard the street cries and the unhallowed noises that ooze through the walls from one house to another to trouble mind and body. She had no longer under her eyes those examples, which cannot always be resisted without laceration, those lusts of all the senses, the sight, smell and hearing, in face of falsely tender appeals that wound the conscience with some charming suggestion, but are heavy with concealed poison.

Mrs. Strangford spoke no more on succeed-

ing days than on the first, but she must have noticed with what fervour Elsie was waiting for a word of counsel, for she said simply, and without further explanation:

“One step at a time, Elsie, a little further every day.”

These were words she liked to repeat cheerfully, with a sort of persuasive insistence—
“One step, one little step more.”

She never said “towards this” or “towards that,” or in what direction it was necessary to take the step. But Elsie understood that it was towards an end that could not be described, and that she could by her own effort, without external aid, find deep within herself, in her own soul, the excellent beauty.

How could she help being convinced? How could she fail to listen? Up to now in the course of her life she had known principally unfortunate people who fought as though they were at grips with a constant calamity. Some of them had the false laugh and something of the heavy intoxication of those who stumble towards the abyss. Mrs. Strangford, on the other hand, offered the spectacle of a felicity so assured of continuance that it seemed as

though she had never known any other state, and adversity could not in any circumstances touch her.

It seemed a prodigy to Elsie, this happiness; and she tried, holding her breath, to grasp it. But for all her efforts she could discover nothing, and her curiosity grew.

It reached a point at which one day she gathered courage. "You are happy" she ventured, giving to the words an infinite depth of secret meaning. Then, she drew back as if afraid that Mrs. Strangford would revolt at this misplaced remark.

But the other looked at her simply:

"Yes," she said, "I have happiness within me." She added: "Happiness is not something you find outside. It is in your own will."

And Elsie understood that happiness for her was evidently the result of will. Had she not made it possible in this house, of which she was the soul, by living according to His law and under His approval?

But this explanation was not quite satisfying. It is only privileged beings who understand this will that makes duty agreeable and easy. Hence, by a turn of mind common among

simple folk, who always find it easier to believe in the marvelous and in a sort of predestination than in a laborious daily virtue, Elsie lost sight of the fact that it is will which governs all things, the will and then the Faith which is a means of Grace. She came to believe that Mrs. Strangford was of a different nature and born for happiness, just as others are born with a bilious or sanguine temperament, with red hair, with a black or yellow skin, or come into the world with some infirmity. She belonged, in short, to an elect class, endowed from the cradle with the moral virtues to such a degree that happiness was written in her fate exactly as misery spells the lot of others.

And since it all came from God and she had not even to make happiness her object, since it was the result of studiously accomplishing her duty, there was no call even to be thankful, any more than a baby has to thank its mother for the life received from her, when every manifestation of its frail life is thanks enough.

So while Elsie said: "She is really great and she has the light of the Presence," she also thought, not jealously, but sincerely and with

all affection: "It is not much credit to her, after all, for she was born for happiness, and she has never known anything else."

Nevertheless she found Mrs. Strangford, on account of such perfection and felicity, a cause for wonder. And her wonder grew little by little, and extended itself to everything about this exceptional household, in which happiness seemed the lot not only of the mistress but of them all.

CHAPTER II

THE house had no curtains, it was open to the day, and a sweet and singular light bathed every room, leaving no dark corners. Elsie remarked with curiosity that she had never seen anywhere else quite the same light as in this house.

She looked out through the windows but could see nothing abnormal outside. It was only within the house that this very strange impression was produced, that of an inexplicable lightness, coming from one knew not where and bathing everything in an almost supernatural light. What surprised her was that she found this same light in every room in the house. More extraordinary still, it seemed that in spite of this clarity, perhaps rather because of this blinding clarity, there was, in this house of crystal, a thing which she had never seen before. Perhaps she was not born to see it. It was too clear, too limpid to strike the vision of those unaccustomed to see in the true sense of seeing, too fine for our poor imaginations, which could not bear its effect—Light itself, in its essence . . . a thing her

feeble intelligence had difficulty in conceiving, that was felt above all by the heart, rendered accessible by the grace of some divine intuition, resisting the cold questionings of pure reason and beyond the investigation of the senses, something perceptible rather to the simple than to the wise, an unaccustomed Presence whose existence could be felt but not in any wise explained.

Mrs. Strangford, observing the unrest in her eyes and the way in which she looked furtively to right and left, asked her the cause of her agitation and the subject of her curiosity. Elsie had to admit that she did not know, at which Mrs. Strangford smiled.

"Oh," pleaded Elsie, "you know better than I what is tormenting me, and you don't help me."

But Mrs. Strangford would not be induced to speak, and when Elsie pressed her, she replied finally that what she was looking for could not be taught, and it was better to discover it for herself and within herself.

One day when she was alone she began her search anew, and it seemed to her that this which she longed so fiercely to discover out-

lined itself before her, as light as vapour and as imperceptible and immaterial. A "spirit," a supple phantom? No; not quite that; perhaps a thought. And when she had in vain pursued it for a long time, she recognized her mistake, and realized that the object of her pursuit was not to be localized at any precise, particular place, but was in all places at once and invisible. From that point she realized that she was in the house of the Inner Presence, and that it was idle to raise an altar or make an image or even to murmur a word recalling His existence, since He was everywhere.

More than that! She understood at last what at first she had not suspected, the very sound reason why His name was never mentioned. He was always near and to speak as though He were absent would be a vain, illusory and misplaced homage. Is it not unfitting to speak in the third person of one who is among us? Why, then, speak the name of Him whose presence imposes itself on the mind of all to such a degree that it is impossible for a single moment to forget Him?

Yet, at length, this obstinate silence became

an obsession for her. She felt more and more the desire of Him, whose name was so rarely on their lips and was not evoked by any allusion or sign, but the thought of whom was so clearly to be read in all their faces. She alone did not know Him, never having seen Him as the others appeared to do, and in this house she seemed in some sense a stranger.

Every day she believed Mrs. Strangford was going to speak at last, and each day her disappointment was greater. An extraordinary impatience took possession of her, and her thirst for that which they refused to disclose increased until it became delirious.

Two or three times again she attempted to question her friends, but Mrs. Strangford seemed surprised, professed not to understand, and gently put her off.

There were, she found, no dark corners in this house, and it had no shadows. The evening that she made this discovery she put her hand between the wall and the lamp, and satisfied herself that no shadow was thrown. Can it be, she asked herself, that there are no shadows in this house, any more than there is any secret blemish, or any source of error or iniquity?

And the incredible discovery combined with the religious respect she felt for such perfection to produce a sort of awe and terror in her, and to throw her own unworthiness into sharper relief. She repeated the experiment in other parts of the house and found that she was not deceived. It was indeed a house without shadows.

There passed over her that long shudder of superstitious fear that affects us in face of some inexplicable phenomenon which seems to defy the laws of nature, while at the same time a superb and hitherto inexperienced joy stirred her breast. She was afraid, and reduced almost to frenzy by the obsession of feverish thoughts that could not be shared, she wanted to cry "Him, Him"—the One she could not see and that she alone did not know, the intangible, whom she felt to be illimitably great. Intense and irresistible was the desire that tormented her to approach Him and to know Him.

Then suddenly she felt herself shaken by a spiritual caress and her eyes were opened:

"I am saved! He is there! He is there!" she cried. "He is there. He moves mountains and can do all things. He makes me burn with an inward flame, and His name, though never

uttered, is like dew to the lips. He is there, the master of all Joy, the Saviour full of Glory and of beauty."

Little would have been needed to make her rush out of doors in an ecstasy of spiritual desire.

At length she understood why Mrs. Strangford did not answer her. The light of day cannot be proved any more than its existence. She was to be left to the joy of a rarer and more fruitful discovery after laborious search. For all the virtue goes out of such a discovery unless it develops in the miraculous secrecy that is the source of all its wonder and its strength. How could her friend show to her this secret that, she, Elsie, had locked up in her own heart?

Oh! to be able to pray, to find just the first loving words, the opening phrases of the distracted dialogue to be whispered later, alone with Him: to find the secret of losing oneself in Him.

If it had been possible, she would have embraced the rite of baptism on the spot, have thrown herself up to the neck in an absolving and consecrating water.

So, leaving Mrs. Strangford at the bedside of her boy Jack, who had been ill for some days, she made her way to a deep stream that ran not far from St. Budeaux on the confines of Cornwall. And, yet, as she went to embrace the limpid current in which it pleased her to see the image of the light that awaited her soul, she hesitated and remained on the bank. It seemed too grave and solemn an act to be accomplished without ceremony and with no witnesses. She realized that there would be a diminished glory about the day if her joy was not mingled with that of others in a mutual song of thanksgiving. She would ask Mrs. Strangford to come with her and every one in the house should be associated in her act of religious rebirth.

CHAPTER III

MRS. STRANGFORD was not in her usual room when Elsie returned, so she went into the garden, thinking she might find her there.

She tripped lightly over the gravel path which crackled under her feet, when suddenly she came upon a sight which struck her like a blow, a shock followed by a mist before her eyes, out of which grew, one by one, a series of images, flung luminous and sharp upon the screen of her consciousness to the accompaniment of the fierce thudding beats of her heart. One detail, then another, then another, insignificant, unimportant: a red anemone, like a drop of blood, standing out against the white stone . . . a piece of velvet ribbon lying discarded on the ground—she was amazed, on looking back, at the completeness with which she had absorbed the scene. For some reason she could not explain she felt that she would never forget that red anemone and that ribbon. Beyond them was the summer-house—white also—that led to Ada Haydee's room. . . . She had never before seen that summer-house

with such vividness, green tiles, yellow tiles, blue tiles that all seemed dancing before her eyes. The door was open, wide open. . . . And there before her was the unbelievable thing, the monstrous sight that she would never be able to recall without horror and bitterness. For she saw for the first time that there was *a shadow in the house*—an immense shadow, but visible only to eyes corrupted by the knowledge of evil, or to those who lacked the force to endure it in a spirit of sanctity. There in the pavilion stretched on a couch was Ada Haydee, her skirts tossed back, and close beside her Mr. Strangford. . . . A filthy act. . . .

Elsie checked herself just in time from uttering a cry. She turned her head and her eyes met those—oh, the unforgettable look in them!—of Mrs. Strangford. She, too, had seen and, very pale, she motioned to Elsie to be silent.

And then Elsie learned the real beauty of character of this woman. (Or was it her profound deceitfulness?—the thought flashed through her mind—for her friend had hidden this wound all the time that Elsie had been frankly congratulating her on her happiness.)

She realized the tragic grandeur of her resignation when Mrs. Strangford said softly:

"Yes, Elsie, I know, and I keep silence. With one woman or another it has been going on for years."

Everything slipped from under Elsie's feet, all she had believed in. A great despair swept over her.

Once inside the house, Mrs. Strangford gave way to tears that were more tragic since they flowed down a face that had been schooled by long self-conquest to resist such weakness. Even now it was not her own misfortune, but the evident despair of Elsie, that had moved her to weep.

"Oh, Elsie, if I could have spared you, if I could have spared you that sight! . . . I knew that it would be more than you could bear!

"Believe me," she added, "however perfect we may have seemed to you, we have our share of faults and suffering."

At that moment Elsie noticed that not a sound or movement came from the little cot where the sick child had been lying. Jack was

dead, and the grief-stricken mother had said no word, nor shed a tear for him.

* * * * *

Up to now Elsie had lived in the midst of evil. She had been cradled in it and it had been her natural habitat. Yet nothing she had seen in those surroundings could stun her like this discovery of vice where she had believed that all was good and pure.

She had seen the downfall of those who decked themselves out gaudily in the borrowed plumes of piety. Now she knew the corruption of those she had believed to be righteous; and she had seen the misery of it weighing down on those she knew to be good. Was it all an illusion, that "Come unto me" of the Master in whom she had hoped to find the perfect refuge? Was the solemn promise of happiness nothing but a sham?

"Here," she said to herself, "are the good people and they too go wrong. Here is a noble and virtuous woman, and she suffers the worst miseries of life."

She did not see in her blindness that Mrs. Strangford was more beautiful than ever in her misery, that her resignation had armed her

with such courage to support the errors of her husband that, rising above her affliction, she had even known how to be happy. She did not see that her self-conquest was such that even the death of a dearly loved child touched her less deeply than the sight of Elsie's own despair.

The torturing doubt came to Elsie whether Faith was after all the all-in-all, since it could not guarantee felicity to its possessors, and even those who attained perfection were not rewarded with happiness.

She decided to leave the house; and Mrs. Strangford, all other emotions absorbed now in those of the bereaved mother, made no effort to detain her.

She realized all that she was leaving, but her nature had never been capable of compromise. As she got farther from Stoke and regained the poor and crowded quarters of the town the realization became keener. Never again would she find that serenity, that peace of mind, so unassailable to the believer but so fragile when attacked by doubt, and which she had forfeited by looking too closely at reality.

"But no more compromise," she vowed. "As evil is everywhere and comes to the good as well as to the bad, it is better to face it and take the consequence of being what we are." Henceforth she would face the world with a mask of tragedy and rebellion. Better so than to hang her head like a criminal or, worse still, go her way a hypocrite.

CHAPTER IV

ELSIE had made up her mind not to go back to her stepmother in Kathleen Street, but where else to go was a difficult question. The shady paths of a neighbouring park attracted her, and as she went in through the gate, her heart beating fast, she had once more the strange feeling that *somebody was waiting for her there*. At least she would find there that rare and understanding companion, solitude, which is like a deep mirror reflecting the soul and listening to its secrets. In solitude we receive back our own thoughts as it were in solemn echoes and we are put in harmony with all the silent things around us. They seem to throw aside their silence to speak with us in nobler and more moving tones than those of our fellows, so that though alone we are not lonely, but with a breathless curiosity make the discovery of our own selves. We are made bigger and stronger by merging our own being in the sum of things.

Walking furtively and holding her breath, Elsie made her way to the center of the park. Trees and shrubs around her were bathed in

the sunshine under an azure sky, and the flowers seemed to have a conscious life of which she had never dreamed and to speak to her directly and tenderly.

And that was not all. Something in the peacefulness of this place gave her a sense of the peculiar grace that attaches to an absolute immobility in time and space, a "central peace subsisting at the heart of endless agitation." It seemed to emphasize the vanity of all perturbation and to sweep away one by one all the cares that have their birth amid the crowd. She felt that it must be away from all such things that she would find the refuge she was seeking. How miserable were the thoughts and worries that were born of daily contact with the world of men! A sort of physical beatitude, an emotional intoxication, serene and joyful, conquered her and gave an unnatural lucidity to her perceptions. It was as though her soul had been revealed to her in its nakedness and she was able to look upon it with a secret delight. But even during these moments the heavy and intoxicating perfume from the garden plots seemed to remind her that she was not soul only, and deep down she felt the stirrings

of a languishing desire to be caressed. She knew that, alas! she could not remain here forever, and there mingled with her ecstasy that inevitable flavour of sadness that belongs to our too brief encounters with those we long to know and from whom we have to part. She must rise and go on her way.

Walking along by the wall of the Naval Hospital, Elsie noticed on the pavement a dainty handbag that somebody had dropped. She picked it up and hastening her steps offered it to a young person a few yards ahead who recognized it as her own and thanked Elsie effusively. Fashionably dressed, the young woman might have been fifteen or sixteen years old, but looked even younger.

The two girls walked along together until they reached a house where the stranger—who said she was known as “Little Maid”—stopped and invited Elsie to come in and have a cup of tea. Elsie declined, but when she admitted that she had nowhere to go her new friend pressed her to enter. She had, she said, a spare room and Elsie was welcome to use it as long as she liked.

Elsie was glad to accept the offer, but her

pride forbade her to be beholden to anyone, and she insisted on repaying the hospitality by her skill with the needle. This was agreed, and Little Maid afterwards declared herself delighted with the result.

The house was in one of the deserted side streets off Union Street, a few steps from the Palace Music Hall. It was one of those streets still to be found at the heart of populous cities, one of those streets where Old England, still proud and unapproachable, hides her face among the cold and stately architecture of a past century. There was a silent dignity about it where nothing disturbed the comings and goings of clandestine couples to discreet lodgings that looked from the outside like the last refuge of the domestic virtues. All round in the main streets was a feverish disorderly life dominated by the flamboyant theatres.

It was a strange district. Bejewelled and elegant Jews stood on the steps of their shops chewing gum or smoking enormous cigars. Their windows, laden with "bargains," gave a false air at once American and continental to the scene, an air artificial and terribly hard. Pictures of dancers, cinema stars and leading

ladies emblazoned the walls. Outside the amusement houses long queues waited and listened to a cacophony of mechanical pianos and phonographs, and to the high, sobbing music that Italians, their heads covered with bright handkerchiefs, wrung from their guitars, while in the distance sounded the notes of banjos and fifes ensconced until closing-time in the doorways of public-houses, and the rolling of drums that announced the end of the entr'acte. A sordid poverty with touches of illicitly acquired luxury was the keynote of the streets in which painted harpies attached themselves to staggering sailors, and insolent niggers trailed on their arms wretched pale slips of girls in silk stockings. It was not a nice crowd, and Little Maid, who loudly deplored such promiscuity, carefully avoided all contact with it.

For some time Elsie was able to discover nothing about Little Maid, who seemed to lead a careless and indolent existence, without any regard for the sordid realities with which vulgar folk have to concern themselves. Gradually Elsie learned that Little Maid had two or three admirers. There was one she called "Uncle," who appeared to take a very generous

and unselfish interest in her and apparently supplied her with all the money she desired.

He was so generous that Elsie could not stifle a doubt, and asked herself whether she was not being deluded. "I must find out more about this," she told herself.

But she always put it off.

* * * * *

Everything here, in fact, spoke of order and decency, and nothing had occurred to offend Elsie's sense of modesty. Agreeable, smiling, treated with consideration on all hands and greeted with an amiable "Good morning" by the Bobbies, Little Maid had a voice and manner so innocent that even in this squalid neighbourhood the roughest of the rough treated her with the respect due to innocent childhood; she was like an angel wandering amid the shameful miseries of life.

So different was her talk and manner from those around her, and so deeply did she blush at an improper expression, that she seemed like one of those exceptional beings who soar above their surroundings and are outside ordinary laws. Elsie was not surprised, therefore—indeed she found it almost natural—when she dis-

covered Little Maid one day sitting on the knees of an uncle who she was told was a very respectable man and one of the Aldermen of the town. Certainly the circumstances seemed suspicious, but Elsie made herself believe for a long time that there was nothing wrong, especially as she was told quite plainly that the uncle treated Little Maid only in a fatherly fashion.

Would it be worth while to get indignant and go out of the house and begin her wretched wanderings all over again? What good had she got already by trying to peer too closely into things?

"Why should I worry about things?" she asked herself. "If evil is everywhere, why should I be responsible for it? What's the use of crying scandal when sin wears a decent cloak, and only a mind bent on discovering it would be aware of evil?" It seemed to her that Little Maid's character was such that whatever she did would somehow seem all right.

Wonderful power of appearances that can make sophists of us all and confound our logic!

Even while her blind friendship led her to whitewash Little Maid in this fashion a voice said: "Open your eyes, Elsie, and judge for

yourself!" But her eyelids were heavy and they refused to open lest she should be compelled to judge against her heart and obey the harsh voice of her conscience bidding her leave the doubtful company she found so pleasant. For in spite of her charming ways and her sharp displeasure at anything low and vulgar, Elsie could not help feeling that in secret Little Maid was less intolerant of the grosser demands of the flesh.

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And she discovered, in fact, little by little, that for all her innocent ways her friend carried on quietly a very prosperous commerce with a number of "uncles," all very amiable and very generous. The time came when discovering her with a new "uncle" Elsie passed it without comment. Once having departed from her habitual strictness, she found her descent on the dangerous slope of toleration very easy. After all, she had not come here for her soul's good, but simply in order to live.

She thought to herself, "Here's vice open and plain as daylight," and it astonished her to realize how easy it was to take it for granted and feel no horror at its poisonous example.

From that point she became acquainted with deception, and realized that there were two moral codes, one for the poor and disinherited and another for the privileged few who spoke nicely, had well-manicured hands, a banking account and enough natural refinement to avoid the manners of the common people.

The example of Little Maid proved to her that it was possible to be unscrupulous with the best of manners. The young sorceress had such an extraordinary gift of seduction, so strange and mysterious a personality, that all the vices which hitherto had presented to Elsie only an evil face seemed to have passed over her soul and barely touched it, leaving no trace on her mouth or in her eyes. Her nickname was well-chosen.

Behind the candid eyes of this "Angel-child" there was no conscience for good or evil; there was no soul. She was only a gracious envelope containing nothing that could fade or be corrupted, in fact, containing only emptiness itself.

One evening, amazed that she could live on such good terms with vice, Elsie said to her:

"Do you do these things, Maid? Is it possible that you have come to that?"

THE SORROWS OF ELSIE

The other looked at her for a moment without replying. Then she smiled, and Elsie recognized a half-admission in the smile.

"Forgive me asking you questions like that, but I'm so fond of you, and I never thought anybody could be so wicked and yet seem so innocent."

From that day Elsie understood better how subtle are the means by which the Evil One destroys us.

Little by little, indeed, and almost unconsciously, she came to regard less severely the things that had formerly seemed reprehensible, and vague desires made their way treacherously into her mind. She became more familiar with the idea of sin.

From time to time she confessed to herself that she was losing her footing, that she was sinking in the quicksands. But she banished the ungrateful thought, telling herself that it came of that unhealthy lust for perfection that had tormented her so long. . . . But the appeal of the senses had a new meaning for her mind and body. Vice clung to her in this corrupt house like a charming perfume or a

melody that haunts the ear. But she determined to keep herself intact.

"Why, of all the pleasures in life, refuse the most thrilling?" she was asked.

But she refused to be tempted.

So obstinate was she on that point that some of them, amused by her virtuous reticence, accused her of having a "boy" on the quiet.

In her confusion she began to wonder whether love as they understood it here was not after all what she was unconsciously looking for, the cause of her long sadness. "But is love really this? and is this love?" she asked herself again and again. And still she could not accept love in the tumult and disorder around her.

"My love would have to be something nobler, finer than this."

A grave and persuasive voice seemed to call her towards the park where she had felt so strangely moved the day she left Mrs. Strangford.

CHAPTER V

SHE was restless and disturbed this afternoon, and felt that the park was the one place for her. She found when she reached it, that it had remained faithful; it was as deserted as on that other day.

Some secret instinct of curiosity had drawn her back. The park with its spinneys and thickets, its unexplored byways, its shady corners and its far horizons beyond the sea and the Cornish hills, might, she felt, have something more to say to her, something secret to whisper in the silence that would find an echo deep down in her own most intimate being. Its breezes would caress her cheeks, its sounds and sweet perfumes and its enchantment for the eye would make her breast heave with pleasure. And immediately with the aid of its beauty she had a clearer perception of what it was that at once troubled and charmed her: a vague aspiration, an unformed desire which was yet so vast as to appear illimitable.

True, she had felt the same thing in Little Maid's house, but what was, after all, only the same awakening of the senses tending insidi-

ously to the same goal, appeared here to borrow a poetry from her surroundings and to be noble, strong and powerful as the great wind in the forest.

Hitherto she had had only some brief friendships with men, which had no particular meaning and no sequel, and went no further than a kiss. Anything more would have offended her who had seen at such close quarters the conduct of her father, the experiences of Victoria Potts and the sensual disorder and sad examples of the street. But Little Maid had made her see that this ugliness could be avoided, that sin did not matter much provided one had the right manner. And the pure beauty of the park in its turn assisted in embellishing the image of physical love that was forming in her mind. The park took possession of her. It invited her to live, to quiver with the voluptuous enthusiasm of a happy animal existence; its appeal was moving and tender. . . . A veritable enchantment!

Why keep up an unequal struggle? Would it not be better to surrender peacefully, as in a dream, unresisting? . . .

And then, why listen any longer to the de-

ceptive counsels of those who worried her conscience while they themselves lived according to their own pleasure? . . .

. . . Everything in the park encouraged this arrogant rebellion, this acquiescence in the forces of life. The birds chased each other freely over her head; the same confident joy seemed to animate the flowers. In the virile and magnificent power that seemed to animate her she felt a desire to clasp tightly to herself the century-old tree behind whose rough bark there seemed to hide the fugitive image of the great god Pan.

She was seized with a sense of interior exaltation; all her being cried out towards an end still uncertain, something fine and solemn and very great. It might be a god, it might be a man, but, whatever it was, she felt that it was to be found only in this park or in the fields and woods, with the co-operation of Nature herself.

The garden was gilded with a redder sunlight and the hours of this enchanted day became more rapid in their flight, more precious, more voluptuously sad. . . .

And little by little a thousand unknown

seductions enveloped her, a growing appeal of the temptation that soon became irresistible.

* * * * *

It seemed to her that it was not a man that she loved but Man. Turning over in her mind some of the youngest and most graceful of those she knew, she felt that she hated their personalities, their concerns, their petty interests and all their fatuity, and that none of them could work upon her to the point of making her forget herself. Yet that was essential, for there is no love without an intoxication which will make illusions possible.

What she would need would be some being above the common laws of our poor daily life, impetuous and ardent, savage and free like a fawn, but, above all, fresh and sincere—one that she could model to the image of her dream.

Seized with an impish light-heartedness, she threw herself at full length on the grass in a state of enchantment. Then she ran, leapt and danced. A man passed, and drunk with her fever and the scents of the park, she amused herself by following him at a distance for fun. "O, Elsie," she reflected, "is it really nothing but a joke . . .?" Her heart beat tumultu-

ously. . . . It was a new and subtle pleasure to walk in the footsteps of this stranger, unperceived, as one indulges the solitary pleasure of forbidden thoughts. . . . He left the park but she continued to follow him. He made his way to the river-side, and through the shrubs she saw him undressing. The deepening twilight enhanced the mystery that crept abroad under these trees at the edge of the silver water into which the stranger plunged. For a moment the absurd idea came to her of hiding his clothes. And when, naked and dripping with water, the bather came to the bank, he saw Elsie, and tried to catch her. But she made her escape.

Night fell. She received it with a great exaltation, this night, which really was just like any other, finding it full of marvellous beauties.

Night! . . . Night! . . . she whispered. She walked at hazard among the shadows that caressed her. And so intense was her fever, so complete her surrender, that she murmured: "I am not Elsie any more. I am no longer Elsie the maiden!"

She made her way unperceived among the workmen going to and from the dockyard,

sailors rejoining their boats, and private soldiers, tall and imposing as centurions. And she dreamed of adventures without morrow in which, obscure and nameless, she was merged in Nature itself—but not in the individual who lies, whose contact is debasing—adventures in which she existed unknown and featureless in the shadows, without personality and seeming almost to be somebody other than herself, so that she remained untouched, in spite of the greatness of her offense, beyond the possibility of corruption, just as Little Maid found her way scatheless through the mire.

Walking straight ahead, Elsie reached Devil's Point at the entrance to the Hamoaze, where the roar of the waves was in her ears. Facing her on the opposite bank, the thick woods of Mount Edgcumbe Park were mirrored in the water; all round the sea glistened with a hundred lights, those of Millbay, of Drake's Island, of Bovisand, of the Breakwater and of the buoys and beacons both near at hand, and fixed in mid-current.

She heard invisible passers call to invisible companions, while below the cliffs a few yards

out there passed destroyers on their way to night manœuvres, and motor-boats and rowing boats, with the singing of whose crews she mingled the sound of her voice. Two men, hearing her, came in her direction, but she hid herself at the edge of their path so that they brushed against her in passing and set her veins tingling with exquisite fear.

It was daybreak before she slept and she lay all the day stretched on the grass. Then towards five o'clock she returned to Admiral's Hard which looks across to the other side of the water where the dainty village of Cremyll with its thatched cottages stands out blue and pleasant among the fields and trees.

The Cremyll ferryboat, laden with week-enders and couples, entered Stonehouse Pool, and then for the first time she felt a little sad and confused, ashamed of her solitude and of all this vain and illusory ecstasy—a monstrous paradox judged in the light of sane and fruitful Nature which has ordained that we shall love in pairs and unite. . . . And jaded as though she had spent a night of orgy, worn out, tossed, her hair in disorder, her eyes black and hands soiled, but yet within herself more settled and

serene, she took the road back to Little Maid's house.

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She had come back altered, her mind in some way set free. She recognized that a change had taken place in her and that she was now prepared to drift with the tide and not worry. A vast new world, all that lay beyond the frontiers of a narrow moral code, had opened as if by magic at her mere desire.

As she crossed the threshold of the apartment, Elsie was disgusted by a sickly perfume that contrasted violently with the healthy breath of the open spaces. It seemed to epitomize the deceits, the intrigues, the habitual baseness that made the moral atmosphere of this house intolerable. She realized that henceforth she would suffocate here, that she must go away. Turning to go down the stairs she found herself face to face with one of Little Maid's young admirers whom that astute young lady kept at a distance, by representing herself as a virtuous girl still under her mother's control. He had found out her address and, believing that it was her parent's house, had come to continue his courting.

Elsie told him she had not seen Little Maid; she must have gone out. . . . The young man called out, and, hoping to find the girl he was seeking, opened first one door and then another. Finally he came to a room which Elsie never entered, a room with a concealed exit to the street. In a moment all was confusion; there were cries and protestations that made them both draw back. Little Maid was there—and not alone. She was almost naked. And the Little Maid whom Elsie had always found so sweet and so modest, employed, to be rid of them, language so vile, so heavy with oaths, that even in the fishermen's quarter, Elsie had never heard the like.

Soon after this violent scene Little Maid reappeared. She was alone this time, and the little witch, with a story of having fallen asleep standing, borrowed five pounds from her naïve admirer and told him to wait for her at the Promenade Pier Concert.

Little Maid, in turn, went out, telling Elsie she would be back in ten minutes; she had clearly no intention of joining the expectant youth.

Elsie waited fruitlessly for an hour and then

went down into Queen Street, where she saw Little Maid disappearing in the doorway of what she knew to be a notorious haunt of vice. Elsie stood rooted to the ground for some instants in the hope of seeing her come out again. At last, her patience exhausted, she went upstairs calling "Maid! Maid!" Nobody answered, and at the end of a dark corridor, in a room with the door open, she saw Little Maid. She was squatting before a black giant, a filthy creature, who lay stretched on the matting, and putting chocolates in his mouth to the accompaniment of peals of laughter. The other neither moved nor spoke. It was vile, revolting.

Elsie seized Little Maid by the hand and dragged her out.

"Come on!" she cried, "Come away with me. Shame on you! Shame! Shame! Shame!"

CHAPTER VI

FROM that day Elsie realized that there was something worse than vice in the gross and brutal forms that it wears in the slums. In the poor districts, after all, there was simply the uncontrolled lust of animal nature, but here vice had become sharpened, refined, against the barriers set up by convention. In the very effort to surmount these obstacles, the flesh had armed itself with subtle inventions that gave birth to a deeper depravity. The anxiety to conceal excesses and to feign a virtue which did not exist—that unconscious homage which evil pays to good—a certain elegance of tone and manner, made vice more formidable, its seductions increased beneath its concealments. Elsie recognized its power, something like the fascination of the serpent. Flight became more difficult every day. Formerly she had felt light, almost winged, but now her feet were riveted to the ground. . . . How could it be otherwise, since she had compromised with sin? . . . She was bound by a thousand invisible cords. Her mind and her rebellious senses spoke to her in a language

hitherto unknown and subtly disturbing. It was as though an invisible hand was held at her throat to strangle her. But the hand was daintily gloved, perfumed and—strange to say—not at all displeasing.

Shameful images pursued her, made up of scattered memories which rose from her unconscious mind and which she could not escape. The warm torpor of an afternoon, the intoxicating perfume of a vase of flowers, the refrain of a love song mounting from the street, all conspired treacherously to prolong her obsessions and send her will to sleep. When she attempted to pull herself together, realizing the danger, her indignation weakened in face of the disconcerting fact that people who seemed in many ways her superior in intelligence or education were not troubled by any such scruples.

Elsie's temptation became enormous, impetuous, horrible, in the midst of the examples by which she was surrounded. Even their ugliness, from being repellent, had become an extra charm.

But this temptation refused to take concrete form in the figure of any man actually known

to her, so that to aid her resistance she might have turned a critical eye upon his imperfections. The object of her temptation was entirely in the realm of ideas, impersonal, intangible, and, for that very reason all the harder to keep at bay. It was towards Man, Man in himself, that the blind desire of the woman obscurely moved. The charm of a particular man whom she might have loved would have done something to soften this temptation, to make it more excusable, but her aspiration was simply towards Man, reduced to his crudest and most brutal terms. Her eyes rested anxiously on the men around her, searching feverishly for what she sought.

There was a pale red-lipped youth called Lionel, who visited Becky, one of Little Maid's friends. The idea of kissing those red lips took hold of Elsie's imagination, and for several days their vision haunted her. She saw nothing but that mouth, those lips, that smile. . . . And then another figure took the place of this phantom.

She had a mental vision of others like herself, young women feeling what she felt, ex-

perienicing the same desires and walking with impassive faces along the streets while all the time they were consumed by an inner fire, young women who attracted the attention of nobody, so virtuous and calm they appeared.

The danger of this state of mind was brought home to her one day when Little Maid had asked her to go on an errand to Mrs. Davidson, a dressmaker in Emma Place. She set out with a feeling of cheerfulness which surprised her. "I must have the courage to admit," she reflected, "why I feel happy and what I'm going to look for there." For Mrs. Davidson was the mother of a fine youth, whose attentions had not escaped Elsie. They had amused her at first and he had even one day been bold enough to snatch a kiss. She realized the young rascal's boyish ardour, and she was glad to be going to Emma Place to-day precisely on account of this boy who was almost a man, but whose inexperience would be her safeguard. She hurried along light-heartedly towards him. His youth dispelled any misgivings, making him appear insignificant—not even a man—it would be such a little sin, simply indulging in a snatch of vice without taking any risks. He,

at any rate, could not dominate her. She would be the stronger of the two, and there was no danger.

"Enough!" she told herself. "Have done with these vile suggestions, this acquiescence in the thought of evil." She asked herself if she would continue with her errand. Then suddenly she pulled herself together and pursued her journey to Emma Place where, in a stiff and distant fashion, totally disregarding the young cherub, she discharged her task.

But she had had a moment of self-revelation, and it left her mortified. She felt that she was at the bottom of the ladder, only a little higher than those whose sole merit is to think themselves better than they are.

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This conquest of herself had a somewhat calming effect, but she was soon given over again to the inferno of her imagination. The shocking promiscuities amid which her youth had been spent had initiated her into all the vices, in familiarizing her with the meanings of the most disgusting expressions. And from this fund of unhealthy knowledge the fever which now possessed her acquired, in spite of

all her efforts, a most surprising strength. It assailed her without respite and slowly but surely gained the mastery. A demon pursued her. She knew now what it was to have an impure soul in a virgin body.

Yet she continued to resist because she was determined—that was how it seemed to her—she was determined at least to give herself *decently*. She yearned for a love so great, so intense, that it would be, as it were, purified, a love whose deep passion would dominate her senses until they would appear to be overshadowed and forgotten.

But where would she find such a love? . . . She realized that she was asking the impossible.

Some of her acts were thoughtless and impulsive. She was often to be seen at the "Star Inn," among a rough lot, free with their gestures and violent in their speech, but possessing a certain simplicity which made their instincts and habits, their coarse pleasures, seem to her less blameworthy because they lived close to Nature and showed in even their most brutal passions a certain Scriptural simplicity and beauty.

These nocturnal promenades of hers were

not without some very risky adventures, though none of them were pushed to the extreme.

One evening, out of bravado, she walked across the Brickfields, a big open space where two women had been attacked the previous night. She was accosted and defended herself with a savage joy, emerging bruised and bleeding at the mouth from her encounter.

Even this experience had no sobering affect. "I must be demented," she told herself. "I am ready to clasp every shadow. All the same, I won't give myself away."

She fancied that her moist but burning eyes gave some indication of her troubled state, and that men looked after her uneasily.

She was mistress of the most insidious forms of solicitation, which multiplied her opportunities for refusal. But mournful and ardent at once, she always regained control of herself before the debacle. It was not coquetry, like that of women who act thus for the damnable pleasure of awakening desire and then refusing to gratify it; it was that she hoped each time to discover the inaccessible and to experience the grace of that irresistible force that overwhelms and compels a surrender.

"Not yet," she would say, "the right man has not come."

Little by little she began to suspect that perhaps her continence had a higher voluptuousness of its own. She was able to indulge this feeling for a moment, but that was all. When she looked more closely into the nature of this secret satisfaction she realized that it also must be abandoned.

"Why not give yourself at once," the tempter whispered, "and get rid of this guilty pleasure?" But she was not to be caught in so obvious a trap.

"Resistance is hard," she reflected, "but not impossible. To help me to overcome this long torment, to rest my heart and my body, I need some deep passion. Better still, perhaps, I want a religion that will lay hold of me body and soul, seize me by the heart, by the mind, by the senses, eyes, ears, smell—yes, even that—and captivate me by its beauty as one captivates a child. I'm too weak to be contented with cold precepts of reason and a faith with no tenderness and no ornaments."

She recalled the intoxication of those temples where singing led the soul captive while the

perfume of incense acted like a charm that disturbed the soul but at the same time brought it healing and peace. Then she realized with horror that all this belonged to the Church of Rome, against which the Kensitites had demonstrated with violence only a week ago near Beaumont Park.

The other temples where the Protestants worshipped were those of a cult austere and unsmiling, cold as a flowerless garden, naked and arid as Truth itself, though as resplendent also. It was the worship of the pure idea, grander, more beautiful, more noble because of its abstractions and, for that very reason, accessible only to the few. Those who were able to accommodate themselves to its austerity developed a special kind of pride and were conscious of the superior virtue of their doctrine. . . . Yet through not taking sufficient account of our poor flesh, by exalting the reason too much and trying to be a law unto themselves they often fell into worse evils than those they endeavoured to avoid. . . . For they set their standard so high that they never succeeded in living up to it; and having determined to fix their rule of life within themselves there was

nobody upon whom they could throw the blame of having asked too much; whereas if the rule had been imposed upon them they would have had less pride and might have confessed their faults simply and asked for indulgence. And since *amour propre*, which is the most compelling force in the world, forbade them to give the lie to the course they had chosen, they were led by necessity to pretend to be better than they were. Hence they were careful to hide their offenses when they committed them and to deny them earnestly.

“Oh, the unendurable, the over-exacting discipline of having to guide oneself. . . . How I sigh for the peaceful joy of being able to acknowledge my feebleness and to disobey a master less unyielding than my own conscience, a master to whom I could tell my faults and who would pardon me. Oh, to be led and shepherded. . . .”

Yet though she did not know it, this was not her spirit, but her ardent and tender woman's nature that so cried out.

Meanwhile, she did not mean to surrender. In her despair she knew only one means by

which she could reconcile everything with her ideal since it carried in itself its own justification, and that was Love.

Thus she sought everywhere as a saviour the man to whom she would be able to give herself in love.

"Only to him! Only to the one that I can love." Some thought it was from caprice or through virtue that she wanted only one man, whereas in reality it was through a subtler refinement, a more avid desire for felicity. The caress she had waited for would be more complete, of rarer essence, more divine, because it would embrace the greater happiness of letting her live according to her ideal, that is to say, completely. But she had to admit with tears that the man of her dreams was not to be found.

She made the acquaintance of Sidney Royal, a pleasant-spoken young man with bejewelled fingers, who seemed well suited to flatter the vanity of a girl. He was a snob, however, of the most detestable kind, and she soon wearied of his patronizing airs—the pet failing of his countrymen—and his constant desire to impress her with his money because he knew she was poor and that she would not ask it from him.

There were two or three others of whom she tired at once and with whom she did not trouble to keep her engagements. Then one night she exchanged a few kisses with a good-looking youth whom she never saw again, and wondered whether, after all, in the strict sense, she had kept her purity.

There was a seaman who tried to convert her, and another who promised marriage on condition that she gave herself to him in advance. She declined his proposals and he offered to marry on the spot, thinking to himself that it would be "a marriage for a week" and that afterwards he could see. She followed him to the Register Office, but while he entered alone she boarded a passing tram and disappeared.

Little Maid and her friends were amused by so much originality. Her constant concern for a love that conformed entirely to her dreams made them consider her a little "touched."

* * * * *

Reflecting that these experiences had been unconvincing, she resumed her wanderings. One evening, without at first attaching much importance to the nature of the impulse that

prompted her, she made her way to one of the parks that had won for itself a particularly offensive nickname on account of the license which prevailed there.

"This is the haunt of vice," she told herself as she entered the gate, "and that is why I have come; it attracts me." As she hesitated on the point of retracing her steps a voice whispered:

"Go and look at it, Elsie. Look evil in the face and see if there's anything to be afraid of if you're firm." She did not recognize in this suggestion an evil excuse for mingling, innocent as she was, in the debauch of others.

The heat was stifling. Not a breath of air relieved the atmosphere of this great park bordered by sombre walls that looked like those of a prison. There were no green thickets, no flowers, only sun-scorched lawns, a kiosk, here and there a poor clump of trees.

The park seemed empty in the vague twilight. Yet at almost every step she had to take care to avoid the couples scattered about the grass. Their silence was amazing. She looked closer, and then stood, suddenly swaying for an instant in her tracks, wondering whether or not

she could go on. For everywhere men and women lay strained together on the grass, bodies pressed against bodies and lips upon lips, in uttermost abandon. As she advanced farther into the park the brazenness, the utter disregard for decency, increased. Once or twice Elsie paused, asking herself if she were not the victim of a nightmare. But no! She realized that there was a tacit understanding that the onlooker would take it all for granted. This silent complicity that was forced on her was almost insulting.

Elsie would not have believed such a scene possible without the evidence of her eyes. She was mortified by the sight of it. It seemed to convict her of a guilt almost equal to that of the sinners themselves. She moved away from the lawn only to find the same thing in every nook and corner of the park—men of all ages with women scarcely out of their teens, and even younger girls with college boys. Men loitered on the paths making inviting gestures to which angelic looking tomboys responded. She noted with surprise that in most cases they were respectably-dressed people verging on the middle class. This was not the haunt of

Phryne. United by the law of pleasure, the sexes here gave free course to their desires.

Elsie realized now why it was that the sour critics who were dubbed "cranks," and why the newspapers, too, denounced these parks as shameful places and demanded that they should be closed at nightfall. Others, however, relaxed the severity which marked their tone when they were concerned with the "diabolical corruption" of foreign countries and particularly of Paris, "the modern Babylon," and refused to permit any doubt to be thrown upon the elect nation. Only perverted minds, they declared, could see evil where there was none, and these parks were the fitting playground of a people worthy of setting a moral example to the world.

On all sides were to be heard gasps of shrill laughter, half-stifled cries and sighs. A fetid smell of elder blossom and cheap perfume burdened the air. Elsie thought of the Cities of the Plain. She fancied she smelt sulphur. . . .

With deepening shadows the frequenters of the park became bolder. The heat was intolerable. Elsie longed to fly, to put miles between herself and this stagnant pool of vice, but

it seemed to her overwrought imagination that no outlet, no escape was possible. She fancied that all round her the streets, the open spaces, teemed with the same vileness. She lifted her eyes as though searching the heavens for relief. But the air was darkened by the span of a huge bridge, thrown across the complete breadth of the park and shutting out the sky. From time to time it trembled under the passage of one of the interminable trains, packed with people, that rattled across it with a clangour of iron. And this bridge, strangely unreal with its black curve, arching vast and threatening over the scene, seemed to her like some monster emanation from the scene itself, some nightmare born of this corrupt and teeming civilization to which she was condemned for life. . . . She had the sensation of sinking into an evil sea whose waves would meet surely and certainly over her head.

Reflecting on her conduct, she realized with surprise that her desire for the whole of perfection had estranged her from as much of it as she might have achieved. That was the result of having left Mrs. Strangford when she found herself deceived. For she had failed to recognize that perfection itself is modest in its

pursuit of higher things and keeps within the mean.

Next day, regretting her mistake, she decided to go and see Mrs. Strangford again. She hesitated for a while, but finally, overcoming her false sense of shame, she made her way towards Stoke.

At first she could not find the house, this house of Soul's Ease . . . which, could she but reach it, would offer her salvation. . . . She wandered round the district without finding the peaceful avenue where she had spent such happy days. Finally she returned home, tired and sad, still haunted by the memory. She dreamed of it at night and set out again in the early morning on her anxious quest.

"Bloemfontein Avenue?" . . . People shook their heads; they didn't know it.

"But yes. I'm sure it exists," said Elsie. "A house with trees in front of it along the roadside and a sweet lady on the threshold looking like an angel. . . . The house of clean living, of moral purity, of the perfect life."

No wonder folk tossed their heads and declared that such a house did not exist, never

could have existed. Indeed, seized by doubt, Elsie herself wondered whether it was true.

At last she found it, and knocked at the door. But the person who opened was a stranger. She told Elsie that she believed a Mrs. Strangford—or somebody with a name like that—had lived there once, but she had left a long time ago.

“Gone abroad,” interrupted a neighbour who was listening. “She’s gone to foreign parts, I believe.” Neither the one nor the other, however, seemed very sure about it. Elsie went away. She asked herself again whether the place had ever existed; whether it had all been a dream.

But turning her head suddenly as she passed a house with slate walls covered with virginia creeper, she fancied she saw the large placid face of Mr. Strangford. Behind him she seemed to distinguish the silhouette of Ada Haydee. . . . And she asked herself whether these, too, were still in existence, or whether they had merely ceased to exist for her, by deciding not to recognize her, or whether finally it was her own eyes that deceived her.

She thought to herself: “It was under a

clear sky that I saw the House of Clean Living, when my heart was still pure—solemn and pure as an autumn morning.”

* * * * *

It was night time when she returned, two or three days later, to Little Maid's house, and she found a number of policemen blocking the way to the door. They would have turned her back, but she gave her name and avowed so convincingly that she lived there, that she was allowed to pass.

As she started up the stairs she had to turn back to make way for four men who were bringing down a body wrapped in a sheet. Bare feet protruded beneath the end of the wrapping and when the top of the sheet slipped aside the face became visible. A murmur went round the crowd:

“Alderman Blank! Alderman Blank!”

Elsie elbowed her way to the first floor, and was turning to the right when in the shadow a hand was laid on her shoulder and she recognized Little Maid, who whispered:

“Go quick to Uncle Bertie—you know where to find him. Tell him to put in a word for me

at once; ask him to come immediately and save me. . . . And on the way take this into old Hannah Holmes."

A heavy purse was put into her hands. Elsie wanted matters explained, but Little Maid had quickly made her way to the roof, unperceived by the men—evidently detectives—on the staircase.

Elsie got away without difficulty, and once in the street she began to run. As she ran there was a clatter on the pavement as the coins rolled out of the purse. This she understood was money stolen or earned in the house of vice. The purse seemed to burn her. She threw it away and then took the tram for Mutley at Derry's Clock.

But "Uncle" Bertie, a respected Alderman of the town, refused to see her. As she persisted, pleading urgency, he sent a reply that he was not concerned in the matter and if she did not go away he would telephone for the police.

Elsie, disheartened, turned towards home again. But this time she found the men of the "Force" inflexible; she was not allowed to enter. Humanity had undergone a transfor-

mation. Faces that previously had been amiable and benevolent had now taken on a look of severity and expressed only hostility and contempt. One of the crowd recognizing her as "One of Little Maid's gang," insults were hurled at her and fists shaken in her face.

Outraged morality must be vindicated. It was said that, treacherously allured into this haunt of vice, the worthy Alderman had died suddenly of a stroke in the midst of a scene of debauchery. Perhaps, even, he had been "done in."

Great was the scandal. The home of the little fairy, so dainty, so popular, was just a house of vice. They called it "the French House."

Crowds, men and women, from a distance gathered round the door. At the street corner men dressed in red chanted hymns; the crowd swelled; a voice was heard praying earnestly for "a purifying fire."

There was nobody now to defend Little Maid. Yesterday her sin, which all condemned to-day, had been encouraged on every side—by the posters on the walls, a whole literature, by the cinema, the plays, the provocative dances in which sensuality hides under a mask of inno-

cence. Everywhere joyful vice was greeted with applause. As long as Little Maid was the angel-child, the disturbing and enigmatical little girl on whom the important people lavished their favours, every one approved, so that evil itself appeared in her to be excusable or even non-existent. The most respectable, like the most wealthy, went to her.

Now, however, an accident had unmasked her in the eyes of the world. Now, to all who knew when righteousness paid best, Little Maid had become nothing but the "pest" of this house of horrors.

With the vilest of treachery the whole world had now turned against her, and somebody—taking up the metaphorical invocation of the preacher—declared that the house, the street, the district ought to be burned. Among the crowd Elsie recognized "Uncle" James, "Uncle" Freddie, Bunty Clark, the well-to-do tradesman, and other "uncles," all very solemn and eminent personages, and all old patrons of Little Maid.

The red-coated singers, followed by women in blue with blue straw hats, marched down

the street, chanting their invocation for "The fire! The fire!" Suiting the action to the word, somebody brandished a torch. Others followed suit. The policemen were unobservant.

There was a sharp movement of the crowd and Elsie found herself swept down into a side street from which she was unable to escape. When at last, her shoulders aching, she forced her way out, a dense smoke was rising above the roof of Little Maid's house. Below, the police were holding back the people, whose cries mingled with the hymns of the Salvationists.

The flames played now along the front and issued from the windows. Once Elsie, overcome, fancied she saw Little Maid in the middle of the furnace, making horrible cries which were drowned by the hymns and the tumult.

Expressions of surprise were heard in the crowd. "Fire? How the deuce did that happen?" "I didn't see anything." "Nor I." Good! Nobody had seen anything.

Such was the passing of the Fairy Child, and her house perished with her.

Henceforth the sacred principles of moral order were safe. Only a few yards further up the street, the initiated could have pointed out the next week a new house where the same uncles entered, discreetly followed by some of those who had set fire to Little Maid's house. And the bulky policeman smiled at a new "Little Maid" who had succeeded to the prosperous business of the old one.

Only now propriety could pass down the street without having to raise its eyebrows. Once more all was calm, modest, "respectable." Morality was saved, because everything was now done on the quiet as decency required.

Elsie left the district. She found work and took up a new and healthier life.

And then she met Horrick.

Part III

HORRICK

CHAPTER I

HORRICK'S habit was to push open the door and walk in without knocking.

When he arrived it always chanced that Annie Bartrum was at home, looking dainty in her long blue pinafore with her arms bare to the elbows and a smile of welcome on her face.

If he was late in coming she would slip for an instant into the quiet street on the pretence of shaking a duster or polishing up the copper plate, shining like a mirror, on which was inscribed "J. C. Bartrum"—the name of her husband. In these happy days if there was a clean house in Caroline Place, it was certainly hers.

From time to time the footsteps of a passing soldier, tall and stiff, with his Brodrick cap tilted over his eyes, would clatter on the sunlit flagstones, or officers in tweeds and flannels, with ladies dressed expensively for sport, all tanned by the sun, would go up to the Royal Marine Barracks. The shrill sound of a trumpet, blending with the whistle of a steamer, helped to give this very Victorian old quarter of Stonehouse, built on a peninsula, that curious

character at once martial and marine which had appealed to Elsie when she parted company with Little Maid. She worked there now, and was enchanted by the district. From the street, or through the clean windows of the houses, one could see a background of the masts of great sailing ships at anchor in the docks.

She rented a room in Annie's house. Horrick, who embarked at Admiral's Hard every day to go to St. James's River, never failed to stop and have a talk with Annie, whose lord and master, a red-headed sergeant of Marines, was at Malta on a cruiser.

Horrick interested Elsie from the first because he appeared to pay no heed to her. He hardly noticed if she was there. It was almost insulting. . . . As if she was not worth at least a nod of the head! Well-built and muscular, very vain of his athletic broad shoulders and his reputation for success with women, he was vulgar in his bearing and manners, with the air of an habitu   of gambling houses and boxing booths. He would attitudinize for hours in front of the two women, stamping and gesticulating until he was in danger of upsetting everything in the modest little room upon

which, from over the mantelpiece laden with his trophies from foreign fields, Bartrum himself smiled down benignly from his photograph.

Horrick seemed to fill the room and take possession of it, after the manner of those who make themselves at home in the absence of the master and are up to no good. A bad lot, in short, and the true type of a foul-mouthed blackguard, whose running fire of obscenities and coarse expressions made Annie blush, but gave her at the same time a thrill of pleasure which she tried to hide with pretended rebukes.

"Oh, I say, you go a bit too far!"

"I don't like that man," said Elsie one day.

After that Horrick acknowledged her existence by speaking coarsely to her, with a cigarette stuck in the corner of his lips. Henceforward they nagged each other unmercifully with every appearance of strong mutual dislike.

* * * * *

"Why weren't you here last evening?" he asked Elsie one hot morning when he found the door open to admit the comparatively fresh air of the street. "You knew very well that I was coming. Why didn't you stay in?"

But Elsie pretended not to hear.

Yonder in the dusty docks an Argentine steamer was discharging a cargo of maize upon the quay from which there mounted a wholesome smell of meal and tar; further out stretched the great bay—the Sound—blue under a blue sky and revealing misty regions between Long Room and Penlee Point towards which Elsie fancied it would be heavenly to wander idly in a canoe, full of that secret intoxication that the first heats of summer inspire. . . . The faintest perfume held penetrating subtleties to which all her overstrung nerves responded.

“You went out,” pursued Horrick. “Why? Were you afraid?”

But Elsie remained silent.

It was the first time he had spoken two words to her without insult, and the first time that they had been alone together; Annie had gone out.

He advanced towards her, bantering, and Elsie would have given a good deal to get away. But already he had pressed her against the wall and was leaning over her. She noticed that this coarse and handsome man scented himself freely, too freely.

"Frightened, really frightened?" he mocked. "All right, then! Run away like a shy little kid."

His breath, the breath of a powerful animal, assaulted her face and caused a tremor of the skin. . . . And they were alone. . . .

* * * * *

Annie had hardly been out a quarter of an hour on her errands. There was no chance of her being back yet. Elsie thought at first that he intended to be spiteful with her. He had entered in his usual idling fashion. . . . Looking for an easy chance perhaps, and certainly Annie, who gave him every encouragement, was imprudent enough. . . . To what extent had he compromised himself with her? . . . And now he was stretching towards Elsie with his irresistible arms and his big brown hands that could embrace or strangle her. . . . No! What a cad! What a brute! . . . On his little finger she saw a woman's ring. . . . Bah! . . . the *poseur*! . . .

"Leave me alone!" she cried, disgusted. "I mean it." What was the matter with him to-day? "Let me go."

She was on the point of scratching him, of boxing his ears. She thrust back his hand.

"Let me go, or I'll scream!" Why was he persecuting her in this fashion?

But she felt all the same intrigued, rather flattered. She didn't understand; she had always thought it was Annie. . . .

"Why did you go out?" he asked again, raising his hand towards hers.

She pushed him back angrily.

"Come! Let me pass!"

"Last night," he pleaded, suddenly abandoning his sarcasm and adopting a warmer and more intimate tone, "last night I came, *and you weren't here.*"

"Ah!" thought Elsie. It was coming now. At that instant the front door clattered noisily. Annie!

Horrick stepped hurriedly to the back. "So long!"

"Baker! Baker!" cried a voice down the passage.

But Horrick had already gone.

* * * * *

Elsie felt irritated, discontented, and the discontent was principally with herself. She

ought to have taken a firmer line with him, to have been more angry. But her feelings softened as she reflected that the matter was really of no importance. She had merely had an encounter with a philanderer, that was all. But it would be just as well for him to exercise his talents elsewhere. He had no excuse for making himself a nuisance here. She would speak to Annie about it.

When Annie returned she lost no time in opening the subject and explained (though it seemed to her that she did not succeed in giving her voice quite the tone of indifference and detachment that she had intended) the way in which Horrick had annoyed her. Horrick's insolence and assiduity, she said, were already making people talk. Really, was it the thing to see him all the time running after a woman, and a married woman into the bargain?

She had intended merely to give a few hints, but already half a sermon had escaped.

"The devil!" murmured Annie, biting her lips.

And Mrs. Bartrum reflected that there must be something behind all this.

Elsie, meanwhile, expressed herself in gen-

THE SORROWS OF ELSIE

erous terms about the absent husband, and declared that Horrick was not worth much. But Annie, shrugging her shoulders, replied that it took all sorts to make a world and one must let people talk if they wanted to. She added that she also knew a thing or two, and was able to read between the lines. Whereupon Elsie became silent and dropped the subject.

From that day they carefully avoided the slightest allusion to the matter.

* * * * *

But, coming in one evening from the provision shop where she had been to buy some tea, Elsie opened the door suddenly upon Horrick and Annie, and was left no longer in any doubt about the intimacy of their relations.

"Very well . . . now I know!"

There was a time when such a discovery would have upset her, but she did not worry about such trifles since her association with Little Maid. All the same, she felt annoyed and rather vexed, without being able to say why.

"Why should I feel like this about it?" she asked herself. "Am I their keeper? Couldn't I have seen before what was going on?"

But this appeal to logic and common sense did not calm her feelings. "I'm a miserable worm," she sighed disgustedly. "Why? Oh, why?"

For she was far from suspecting the vague jealousy that was the actual state of her mind.

* * * * *

A little while later, as she entered the house quietly, she heard the noise of a violent quarrel. Walking on tiptoe, Elsie went towards the kitchen and looked in at the half-open door.

Annie was standing facing Horrick, shouting at him and punctuating her declarations with bangs on the table!

"No, you shan't have her! You shan't have her!"

And Elsie realized that they were talking about her.

She coughed twice to let them know that she was there, and the voices were silenced. Horrick soon went out. In his rage he gave a vicious kick at the cat which had the misfortune to get in his way.

He did not put in another appearance for a week. Then he was on view again, and Elsie realized that she had been the object of a bar-

gain. For Annie discreetly made herself scarce when he appeared, and he and Elsie were left alone.

* * * * *

Elsie's first impulse was to be indignant. She was wounded by the idea that a man could so despise her as to think of winning her favour by such methods. She swallowed her indignation, however, but took care to show the aversion she felt for Horrick and to make it clear that she understood what had happened. Her resentment at the affront this man had inflicted on her was stronger than any feeling of indignation at the complicity of Annie, whom she knew to be entirely lacking in moral sense.

Mrs. Bartrum was nonplussed. For a long time she had believed that Elsie had a weakness for Horrick, and that she had concealed her little game pretty skillfully. But she was perplexed when the girl displayed by her tranquil resistance that mysterious barrier, incomprehensible to herself, which is a woman's modesty, and the outcome of those virtues that make her surrender something to be prized. Elsie had always seemed to her to be rather strange; she supposed that she would abandon this atti-

tude one day; a little gentle persuasion would suffice.

Moved by the desire to keep Horrick and to maintain a hold on him by helping him to obtain his pleasure, she returned more than once to the charge.

"It's all because of you," she told Elsie, "that he's got a grudge against me and hardly sets his foot here now. Bah! Am I going to lose a friend for such a little thing?"

Nowadays she seemed thoroughly restless and depressed. In the absence of her lover the days seemed endless and empty. Her spirits low and her lips drooping, the pale and gloomy Annie, once so "comfortable," abounded in mournful exclamations of the true mortuary flavour.

"Life is short! . . . Ah! men are a bad lot!"

Or again, she would pity the lot of women, not all of them, but only those of the right sort, those who were worth while. And their number, if she was to be believed, must have been terribly limited, for she took no trouble to disguise that she might one day, if she chose, have something to say "about a certain class

of young lady"—but that was enough for the time!

She stood at the window, sad and dejected, looking with disconsolate eyes at the heavens as if seeking a witness of her immense misery there. Then, tenacious and persuasive, she would return to Elsie.

Why then, she pleaded, make unnecessary troubles for ourselves? And why be pig-headed for nothing, since ill-luck would have it that a certain somebody had taken a fancy to her?

Elsie pretended not to understand.

Then, changing her tactics, with tears in her voice and warmth in her gestures, she pictured all the possible happiness:

"He's a terror! A fair devil, I tell you," she declared, rolling her eyes. "He's *the* man! . . . Talk about a man, there's nobody like him," she persisted in the tone of a connoisseur to emphasize the pleasures to be obtained in an hour with "her George"; for she was convinced that Elsie was sulking and that there was nothing else in her refusal.

"Bless the boy! My soldier man is a poor

stick alongside of him. . . . But, of course, you *know*." And she nudged Elsie with her elbow. "You know very well what's what."

But Elsie never stirred. What a milksop!

The abominable part of it was that it was she, Annie, who had to bear the brunt of this obstinacy. What time was being wasted! and her husband's boat due back in a couple of months!

Furious and past all self-control she indulged in bitter allusions to "conceit" and "prigs."

But Elsie's reserve held firm.

Horrick, who had been waiting attentively for some good results from her persistence, ended by losing patience and took no more account of Annie, neglecting her completely. He was seen at the house in Caroline Place only at rare intervals, when he dropped in to see if by chance the affair was "ripe," if there was anything fresh. Heartbroken, Annie lamented his cruelty without end.

* * * * *

To judge only by his visits, now less and less frequent, he seemed completely to have given up expectations of Elsie. At least that

was what she concluded herself and—oh incomprehensible and fickle heart of woman!—she felt a little angry that he should find it so easy to forget her!

There was no doubt about it. He had, quite rightly, finished with the affair once for all, and had left the two wenches to the devil and their own fate. He was above such company, that was clear; a man well-designed to flatter the vanity of the sex, who could gather in his course all the women he wanted; a richly endowed man who would not be content with words or amused with grimaces, who had only to choose in order to take. . . .

Elsie reflected that his mind would be occupied now by some new fancy. That did not particularly disturb her; but to have been forgotten so easily wounded her *amour propre*.

“What is that booby doing now?” she surprised herself thinking more than once.

She reached the point of looking up and down the street in the hope of seeing Horrick, and, with a touch of malice, she hoped that he would see her, just to make him angry for a moment in reviving his desire. But, phlegmatic and indifferent, he passed without so

much as turning his head, dapper as ever, and whistling some tune of the moment, with a dainty little handkerchief protruding from his sleeve and often a flower in his buttonhole. She would have given a lot to spirit away that flower or that handkerchief. . . . Once or twice she began to whistle gaily to arrest his attention.

He took no notice.

Then two or three details that she noticed one after the other suddenly whetted her interest. It seemed to Elsie that Horrick was paying a good deal of attention to Susan Emmins, the daughter of the fish merchant whose little shop, very odorous in the dog days, stood at the corner of Bath Street near the docks. Susan, with her tiny bright dark eyes in a moon-face, with her green ribbons and roses and her affected manners, got on most people's nerves, and Elsie was surprised to find herself opposed by such a rival. She was a woman and therefore unable to rest indifferent to such contingencies. It vexed her to observe that a man who had wanted her could take the least notice of Miss Emmins.

And then—who can control the treacheries

of the subconscious mind?—she found herself thinking of Horrick when she awoke in the morning, and without any antipathy. She even saw him distinctly in a dream. One evening she thought she saw him in the street and, hardly realizing what she did, she hastened her steps to catch up with him. After a few yards she realized her mistake and rebuked herself: "Elsie, are you mad?"

This nonsense must come to an end.

She did her best and believed she was successful. She rejoiced in her own self-control until it occurred to her that the new-found zeal with which she devoted herself to the box of nasturtiums on the window-sill was a crushing witness to the contrary.

"Stupid and vain I am!" she sighed. "I thought myself better than the rest, but I'm just the same. These flowers are only a make-believe. It's *him* that I'm thinking of."

For a moment she acknowledged defeat.

"Silly pride to struggle!" whispered an inner voice, sounding soft and persuasive to her ear. "Silly pride!" She felt that she was conquered.

But it was not in her nature to bow her head without a flourish.

H O R R I C K

"Very good! I'll go to him," she said to herself once or twice.

But even yet she was not certain that she didn't say it simply from bravado.

CHAPTER II

IT was the day of the char-à-banc trip into the country, given by the management of the factory at which Elsie worked. Mrs. Bartrum joined the party as a guest, and on their return the two friends decided to have a light supper together—some cold meat and ale. While they waited with the jug in the bar of the “Queen’s Arms” they noticed Horrick sitting on a stool with his elbows on the counter.

“Look! Him!” whispered Annie with intense emotion. Had he seen them? Could he have seen them? She lowered her eyes.

Horrick drank his pint and stayed, quiet and unaffected, where he was.

“Such a nice boy! Such a good boy!” Annie began.

“Oh, be quiet!” counseled Elsie.

But Annie discovered that she was dying of thirst and ordered two glasses of stout.

A minute or two later Horrick, who went to help the landlord to change a gas mantle, passed close to them and addressed them very politely. The gas lowered suddenly and, profiting by the darkness, Horrick drew near to

Elsie and embraced her. She pushed him away briskly, but they continued talking for a few minutes in a friendly fashion.

Gathered around the door five or six of the gossips of the neighbourhood had seen what had happened and laughed complacently. One of them whispered something to her neighbour, who replied, with her hand to her mouth and looking at Horrick:

“Him? . . . Do you think so? . . . He’s married.”

Though she spoke very softly, Elsie heard.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked Mrs. Bartrum a few seconds later as they left the public-house. She seized her friend feverishly by the arm. Why hadn’t she told? For a moment she thought she was going to faint. “I feel awful . . . too unhappy for anything.”

“Married?” she found strength to say. “Married? Didn’t you know that?”

Then she felt ashamed at having betrayed so much emotion.

“That beer has turned my head. I’m behaving like a fool.”

Annie shrugged her shoulders with an air of detachment. She laughed foolishly.

THE SORROWS OF ELSIE

"He'll come back!" her heart cried, leaping up. "He'll come back! He's made it up with Elsie, and he'll come back!"

* * * * *

Horrick did come back, but Elsie disappointed his hopes by continuing to frown on him, and he told Annie he would end up by thinking Miss Elsie Farquhar a trifle soured. Anyhow, she carefully avoided him. She was angry at what she had learned. His bargaining with Annie to find a way of making love to her might be allowed to pass as a young man's folly. But married! That was inconceivable. The worst of it was that she could not explain why she should feel annoyed. Certainly she had never taken his attentions seriously or given any thought to the idea of marrying him. And yet . . .

At bottom her uneasiness was no more than natural. For the first time in her life she had considered a man seriously and almost unconsciously. Love had overtaken her and captured her by surprise. Mastered her, conquered her. She was forced to admit it, and at the same time she was disturbed by a clear conviction that this man was not worthy of her. For

she was aware that she had closed her eyes to his too evident faults, and little by little unguardedly invested him with all manner of seductions, as one does with an evil thought that the mind plays with, confident of being in no danger from it. Had she not at one time detested and despised him?

In all this the fault had been entirely hers. She must make up her mind to take Horrick as he was or to renounce him boldly. And if, as she feared, she found herself unable to give him up, why make unnecessary difficulties?

And though the inner voice of conscience pointed clearly the wisest way, she was inclined to resist this certain counsellor step by step, as we are all inclined to do when we are offered advice. To cherish her pet illusion as long as possible, that of attaining happiness, she fell to defending Horrick to herself; but yet, as he fell farther and farther from the standards she had set for him, she realized that she became in proportion more fatally attached. From that time she was capable of feeling jealous.

Then it disturbed her to think that, now she had finally decided in favour of love, her

heart had gone out not to the most worthy, but to the most despicable. For, in spite of his degradation—had she not seen him one evening in company that spoke for itself?—she watched with shame her own growing desire for him. She felt no longer any doubt that her inclination revealed an imperious sensual desire that she would henceforth be powerless to control. This man was necessary to her, he alone and none other.

“Here before me,” she told herself, “is this love for which I’ve waited, which I’ve dreamed of so long as a thing shining and pure. And here am I torn out of myself by a savage passion that not even ugliness and foulness can revolt. . . . Love? The fascination of some hideous serpent!” She did not know whether it was love that drew her or simply the charm of some untasted sensual pleasure, inexpressibly sweet. In what hideous nightmare had she had a foretaste of this depravity?

“But what matter?” she thought to herself, weary and rebellious at once. Then she reflected that love’s habit is to seek out its own utmost satisfaction even if it is to be found in the vilest dregs. Very good! She would

drink to the dregs. She was not made for rose-water prettiness, for sweet nothings, for the conventional heaven of a perpetual idleness and felicity. Love presented itself to her rather as a sombre necessity compact of tears and mutilation. A fig for quiet boys with the air of Sunday-school teachers. There's only one life to live. She was stirred by the desire for some wild adventure that would come up to her idea of passion. And this seemed possible only with Horrick. The evident vulgarity of this man, whom she knew to be treacherous, vicious, incapable alike of pity and remorse, had an appeal of powerful realism which at once intoxicated and frightened her.

Then when her better self raised its head, objecting, she put it out of court with the thought that if she had a hold upon him she would be able to direct him, to guide him into better ways.

Why torture herself? Why continue the unequal struggle?

"Such a fuss!" an insidious voice whispered in her ear. "Such a fuss and for such a trifle!"

Annie, with anxious eyes, watched the progress of her downward path.

Elsie felt all the pains, all the bitterness of the conflict. Her agitation was extreme.

For several days in succession she watched his movements unperceived by him and dogged his footsteps like a shadow.

Then she avoided him more carefully than ever.

One evening he came upon her unexpectedly in Edgcumbe Street and took her by the arm. She started, surprised. He was not in her thoughts at the moment. She believed she had succeeded in driving him from her heart and mind; she had decided not to see him again.

But at one blow her resistance collapsed. She felt small and weak by the side of him, he seemed so powerful. . . . He could knock her down with a glance. . . . He held all her life, all her future, in his hands. . . . With a gesture he could break them. . . . Meanwhile she was still brave, able to suffer without crying out. Yes, she could still fight, still defend herself, still hurt him. They would continue this cruel antagonism, wound each other more, suffer longer. . . .

Why? . . .

Her eyes looked into his, tender and conciliatory:

"You're not a bad man? . . . A man entirely bad?" she asked, moved and a little frightened now.

"Oh, tell me that you're not altogether bad?"

She would have been ready for anything if he had only taken the trouble to lie to her and coax her gently.

He looked at her in astonishment and whistled. Evidently she was his.

"Here!" he said, "come on, and——"

It was said harshly, cynically. The word fell like an insult, like a blow. Yet the disgusting shamelessness of the invitation did not frighten Elsie. At heart she even liked its masculine vigour. It was really he, his mark. . . .

But she refused. "He is married!" And then the coarseness of his words had not met her urgent need of tenderness.

He left her.

She found herself more lonely and deserted than ever. It would not have needed much to make her run after him and call him back.

But already he had disappeared in the crowd. Looking at the muddy pools in the gutter she reflected: "Perhaps one day I shall come to picking him up from the mud, from the midst of the filth."

* * * * *

Then one day, taking the ferryboat across the Hamoaze to Cremyll, she set out to join Horrick and offer herself to him. Passing Onderton, Millbrook and Southdown she went across the fields to St. John's Creek to the hulk on which he worked.

It was so hot that the shallow waters seemed to be boiling on the muddy sand. Yonder, on the other side of the water, were the noisy arsenals of Devonport, immense buildings white and shining in the sunshine. But here all was silence and shadow and mystery.

She sat down for a moment in the tall, rich grass by a hawthorn bush and reflected. Yonder, amid the greenery of the opposite bank, floated the hulk, an old sea-rover, with the masts cut down to two or three feet. She rested peacefully on the waters of the creek. Once or twice Elsie noticed the man she had come to look for. He appeared in his shirt sleeves,

stretched himself and yawned and walked slowly up and down the boat. Having a stroll, no doubt, between two naps, like a man of leisure, paid for doing nothing, a man who finds it hard to kill time since his work consists entirely in supervision. Then he disappeared into the cabin, never suspecting that Elsie was so near and that her eyes were on him.

What should she do? She might call him, let him know that she was there. He could come over and she could explain perhaps that she had taken a fancy to give him a passing "Good afternoon" for a lark, just to see how he managed living there all alone. And if he became too pressing she could pretend to defend herself with a good deal of energy. She might. . . .

No! . . . Not that! She would go to him, filled with emotion, her arms laden with flowers, and she would say:

"Horrick, here I am. I offer myself to you—my untouched body, all my dreams, all my unspoiled past that I sacrifice to you, the embodiment of vice, infamous and repellent,

but strong. . . . I am weak and contradictory, too weak to resist any longer; I am a woman."

It would have to come to that, a magnificent confession of powerlessness to refuse herself any longer, a humble submission, a full and entire acceptance of her sin—no more vain resistances, excuses, make-believe, hypocritical tears and calculated blushes. No! No! . . . It must come to that!

She stood up and made her way through the shrubs down to the waterside, moving silently over the smooth black stones. She found a ferryman's boat stranded there and taking the oars she pushed out into the water.

She would have liked to go straight to him and take him by surprise rather than that he should see her panting and struggling, for her oarsmanship was slow and amateurish and she was afraid of being laughed at. But Horrick heard the sound of the oars and he stood watching her without a word.

A strong current maliciously turned her from her course. Pressing her lips together she redoubled her exertions and finally reached the side of the hulk.

She expected him to receive her with a cry

of pleasure, a tender word, that he would help her to board the hulk. But he shouted:

“Mind there! Keep out of the way!”

She replied passionately that she was coming aboard, and stopped rowing. The current carried her several yards away and she used all her remaining strength to regain the lost ground, while he looked on, indifferent and sneering. The sweat glistened on her brow.

At last she was able to accost him, to put her hand on the hulk, and succeeded painfully in hoisting herself up to the port hole. Then he appeared to discover with amusement that she was there.

She had come to surrender herself: that was how he understood it. But when he would have seized her she put up a fierce resistance. She ran to the end of the vessel, and leaping into her boat, made towards the bank, terrified by the idea that perhaps he would pursue her.

But she did not go back to the town. She rested in the neighbourhood of Millbrook, took breath and gradually calmed herself.

The sun was going down, the solitude caressing and reposeful. Gracious figures in har-

mony with her own state of mind seemed to people the countryside. She was not afraid now. She felt gay again, restless and roguish like the leaf that lay near her on the grass and seemed to flutter and lie still without apparent cause as though seeking to tease and intrigue the eye that watched it; capricious she was as a bird that swings from branch to branch; something tender, something indefinable in her soul, that secret aspiration that sends our thoughts out towards the unknown on the wings of the passing breeze.

She found here, intoxicated by the open air and the sense of liberty, all the emotions that had moved her before in the park.

For a long time she wandered about in this fashion, and then, thoughtlessly and almost unconsciously, as night fell she turned her steps again towards the creek.

Though she felt no fatigue she walked slowly and with heavy steps. Her heart beat violently, her knees trembled.

Above all else she had the consciousness that she was walking straight forward from necessity and without the possibility of altering her course. It was as if she walked down

a sloping road with walls on either side. There was no turning to left or to right; the slope drew her on. Where was it, in what strange, forgotten book, in what dream perhaps had she seen a fearful picture of blind forces that pushed one forward, dumb with fright or plunged in stupor, towards something long feared or hated, some awful object of aversion that, weak, broken and will-less, one has to accept at last?

Still she went forward, her throat dry, her lips on fire. She was thirsty. Oh, for a drink of water! And where was she bound? . . .

Then she realized that she was following the path that she had taken some hours earlier, the path that led down to the creek.

The night was heavy, starless and without a breath of wind. Here and there the cries of birds and the scampering of beasts broke the silence. At last she saw the beach and groped her way down to it; the boat was still there. She went out to the hulk again, and, like an expected accomplice, she whispered:

"Here I am."

This time, too, he had heard the splashing of the oars. He asked simply:

"Boat moored firm?"

"Quite firm."

Then she fell into his arms.

All her long virtue, so jealously preserved, was immolated without regret, in the fever of a moment, in one evening's folly. She surrendered it with hate, with rage. She had to revenge upon herself her disquietudes, her secret and contemptible pride in wishing to be different from others and better, her foolish lust for perfection, that impossible desire to reach the absolute in everything which had little by little brought her to the depths of despair because the absolute is unattainable here on earth. . . . She surrendered with an ardent iconoclastic joy, in surroundings whose very abjectness pleased her, because it made her sacrifice seem greater, and greater too the passion which begot it.

She had to avenge all the agonizing suffering that arose out of her woman's nature and that she had borne so desperately and so long.

For an instant, and for an instant only, she felt this transport of exaltation. Once more herself, she was seized with a doubt whether

Horrick had felt the value of the gift she made him. And it came upon her immediately as a new sorrow, that her unspotted past counted for nothing in his eyes.

Then, when she found herself alone once more, the beauty of the caress presented itself to her and she realized the splendour possible to love. But she discovered, too, at the same time, how rarely this harmonious splendour is to be achieved.

It had needed the experience to bring her this amount of knowledge and this amount of disappointment. . . . She had cast a dazzled glance on the temple, had heard the vibrations of distant harps and realized what might be and what ought to be; and then a deadening despair had seized her.

She knew now the deceit and emptiness of the intoxication and the seeds of death that it contained. She knew that, since two beings were needed to compass it, she could not provoke the intoxication by her own will and alone, because it was fatally dependent on the choice of a partner, whose demands most often would involve a cruel abdication of part of her own personality. . . . And it was this knowledge

of being required to forfeit a part of herself that made her doubt the supremacy of the love which she already guessed to be, in some measure, insufficient and vain.

In this uneasy return upon herself, which was in fact a sort of remorse, she saw Horrick in a very harsh light and robbed of all illusions. She saw him as he really was, as she had foreseen him to be from their first encounter; and she did not know whether that which had drawn her to him was the false countenance of love or that fearsome appeal that sometimes seems to rise from below as we stand at the edge of a precipice.

CHAPTER III

SINCE the night of her visit to the hulk, Horrick had not seen her, and was in no hurry to run after her for fear of appearing too eager.

On the third day, however, he came and asked for Elsie.

"Elsie," called Annie in her most ladylike voice, "here is some one to see you."

And when Elsie showed herself on the landing she added: "Come on, hurry up: it's him!"

But Elsie simply shut the door, feeling annoyed:

"Ah! Does he think he's got a right to me?"

It made her angry that this man should think he had a right to control her as though she were his own flesh. Up to now she had always been independent.

Horrick, who was in a hurry, did not insist. From the window she saw him going away, and she had to admit to herself that she was vexed. She felt surprised at herself for having sulked in this fashion, and she reflected that a good many women would have acted in just

the same way from caprice or coquetry; in a word, to make themselves desired all the more. How little of that kind of thing she had in her. . . . Besides, she didn't care so much about him as all that.

The next day he came again, and Elsie gave him no better welcome. The faithful emissary Annie was able only to pass on his message that he would be waiting at eight o'clock that evening under the bridge in Union Street. "He seemed to me to be rather put out."

But Elsie did not keep the appointment.

Her indignation rose. It was true, then, that Horrick now flattered himself that she was at his beck and call, that she was his prey and had surrendered her independence. . . . What an idea!

Then, thinking over these things, she was conscious for the first time that a great change had come over her physical and moral self; she was no longer a virgin. Up to now she had not looked at it from precisely that angle; now being changed, and by Horrick, she realized, with anger, that it was natural for new relations with him to ensue.

She realized how in some respects what had

happened might make a link between them and give birth to a sentiment of domination in him and create an idea of submission in herself . . . a reality hateful to become aware of, and particularly when it was too late!

Yet when she looked right into the matter she did not feel herself united with this man, linked to him. She remained, and wished to remain, free.

Was she going to be one of those girls who give themselves once only—one night without a morrow—and so pass across the surface of a man's life mysteriously, leaving no trace; pursuing henceforth their way solitary and silent, their lips for ever sealed on a secret they will share with none?

She reflected on her misery.

A great sadness swept over her; she had been deceived. For years she had preserved herself in the hope of an exceptional and majestic revelation: the revelation of Love. That alone could render possible her abdication before the strength of a man. And where was it now, this Love?

In her affair there had been nothing ex-

ceptional, nothing immense, but its banality: she was simply one of the thousands of women that betray themselves by surrendering without love. There was no comfort in the thought that perhaps love would yet come. "I didn't love him to begin with," she had heard people say sometimes. "Love only came later, and then perhaps it was a better love—a calm love, born of common affection and sacrifices shared." She shuddered at the thought of the long and impossible patience that would be needed for that.

What she had dreamed of was a sort of fever, a delirium of enthusiasm, a mad adoration that would owe its existence to them both, arising spontaneously and enveloping them as in a cloud, to bear them up and far away in a mutual ecstasy, a common dream. . . . And there had been nothing of all that. She might have known.

It surprised her to discover, and so late, that there was no tenderness between them, not the least trace of affection, nothing that spoke to the heart. A storm of caresses, the fierce fury of the male, the egotism of which she might easily have foreseen, a momentary passion of

the senses, and that was all. She suspected now that the flesh alone had been engaged, that bodies without souls—yes, almost dead bodies—had sat at this banquet.

More than that, she fancied she detected in him a sort of secret contempt because he did not find her his equal, because she was not on the same level of baseness, a resentment, an obscure hatred because he realized within himself that instead of drawing close to him, she kept him at a distance and eluded him.

But it is not only the flesh that demands its own; the mind has its claim as well as the heart. Often, indeed, the flexible character of a woman will find pleasure in the contact of a stronger and ruder spirit. It is sweet sometimes even for the most independent to obey, to reflect that one has chosen a master and to experience the sensation of being conquered, thereby affirming, in effect, one's own conquest; or, if one is rebellious, to feel at least the thrill provoked by a restraining force. Does not that thrill indeed add something to the pleasure? Unconsciously she had hoped for this, but in spite of all the brutal strength that she recognized in Horrick, she had not

found in him any of that prestige, that moral ascendancy and superiority, that would have been sharp to the taste, arresting as a new song, or, perhaps even sweet and good and in itself provoking love. The proof of her detachment, her failure to be absorbed, lay in the fact that she had been able to keep him at bay. This was the greatest of all her deceptions; she had believed, at least, in his power of fascination, his domination—but no, he remained without authority over her.

Would she ever be able to say to him, as she had sometimes dreamed of doing: "You are my king, my master"? She felt that that would have appealed to her, to grovel on the ground at his feet, to display her submission and to plead with him: "There! trample on me," in order that he might dominate her the more completely.

She recalled the frail creatures that she had seen, docile and confident, on their husband's arm; and those quiet wives, weary with child-bearing and wrinkled by privation, who yet moved bright-eyed and serenely happy in the midst of their large families. When she passed one in the street she felt tempted to go

over and say: "So you love? You really love? Oh, what does it feel like? What is this love? Give me the secret of this happiness that you possess that seems so great." And forgetting that perhaps it was not in his nature, after all, to be loving, she felt weighed down with resentment that he had robbed her of such felicity.

So she found herself at the cross-roads. On the one side she felt called upon to save her independence, on the other she would have trembled with joy if she could immolate everything on the altar of love—everything even down to that need for independence itself. She stood measuring the vanity of this liaison without tenderness, without affection, without self-respect.

* * * * * *

For eight days she saw nothing of Horrick, who, considering his dignity affronted, had not appeared again. He also intended to make himself desired. Annie, the abandoned one, was a curious spectacle. She did not know whether to rejoice or not that Horrick appeared to have forsaken Elsie in her turn.

Then maliciously, Fate took a hand in the

affair. They met by pure chance one night in a silent and deserted street and were mastered by a brutal and unreflecting attraction. Love had no part in this passion which was strong with all the irresistible force of the sin that threw them into each other's arms like two condemned criminals awakened at the same hour to undergo the same sentence for a common crime . . . like two drunkards staggering towards the same cup of deadening poison.

It was only one evil moment, and everything in that surly reconciliation, with pressed lips where there was not even room for deceptive words, proclaimed the power of the senses and of the senses alone.

At the moment she did not recognize all this, but some hours after she thought to herself: "I shall know in future how to avoid that trap."

In her inexperience she had not reckoned with this furtive, challenging return of the flesh, whose demands had been hitherto unknown to her. The experience had left her dazed, and, for the first time, sated and stupefied with pleasure: too tumultuous and agitated to reflect and to react to her feelings. And all

because she had been able for a few minutes in the very arms of this man to forget what it was in him that wounded and offended her, his faults, his personality, all that was antipathetic. Then she found a new cause of offense: that love itself, like the choice of a partner, might count for very little and prove to be just a means of pleasure, soulless, but capable all the same of vibrating and glutting itself with joys with which the joys of her heart had nothing in common. She understood now the bitter meaning of what men call carnal passion.

This was the first step towards that slavery of the senses which one day might swallow her up entirely. For the perilous thing was that for a week after her experience she felt more tranquil and rested in mind. Strangely enough, considering the danger that she had perceived at her feet, she even experienced a sort of moral appeasement.

At the same time she recognized what power a man can exercise over a wretched woman even though she does not love him; she understood those miserable liaisons, where the force is lacking to break away, the secret of those couples who limp along, dragging after them

with sighs and tears the long chain that they curse and bless at once, the chain, half of whose links are mutual hatred and half mutual indispensability.

She felt, nevertheless, a sort of mild gratitude to those strong loins and those broad shoulders. And that was what above all frightened her: the dread of being held by that feeling to a being whom she could not but abhor. At least let her not by evil habit, drawn by pity and indulgence, debase herself to the point at which she could feel equal to the vilest, to the point at which she would no longer feel disgust. She trembled all over at the thought that it might come one day even to that.

She got a clearer view of herself one evening when she saw a couple tenderly embracing on the terrace at West Hoe by the seaside. In the half-light she thought she recognized Horrick. Then one of the revolving lights shone on their faces and she breathed again. It was not he.

Was he, in fact, capable of betraying her? She tried to probe the value of the sort of attachment he could feel. She would not have liked to admit that she was jealous. "Oh, not

that! not that!" Her pride at least she wished to spare.

* * * * *

Meanwhile she found herself drawn back again and again to Horrick, attracted by physical desire, by weariness, the hazard of a meeting, and above all by the faint hope of finding the unattainable even yet in a more abandoned caress.

Except in the few moments of transport when a stronger law threw them together like animals, she felt herself a stranger to this man. She came to him ill-humoured, disliking him and despising herself in the consciousness that what he sought was not union with her, but to subject her to his caprices, to make her his property. The suspicion deepened in her that there was a curse on these caresses, like barren lands scorched by a too fierce wind; that she would never know the Mystic Rose of love, purifying and absolving. She was heavy of heart.

"It's my fault again," she reflected, and she realized that in her pride she had refused love as it offered itself instead of accepting it with joy and thanksgiving. She asked herself

whether she had treated Horrick fairly, simple and primitive soul as he was in spite of his vices, in keeping herself remote and defensive, and in cherishing the futile idea of her own superiority.

She told herself that she should love more simply and give herself without affectation. "I will go to him. . . . I will be a loving and respectful mate to him."

But it was here that Horrick lacked insight. Because he had seen her two or three times in a transport in his arms he imagined that everything was permissible. He missed his opportunity from lack of a sufficiently large humanity, of generosity, of some intangible and indefinable quality which might have accomplished the miracle of bringing them together.

Once only she let herself go. "Georgie," she sobbed, "what should I do without you?"

The avowal surprised him, unaccustomed to this tone from her. His self-satisfaction swelled.

"Take me, all of me, Georgie. I want to be looked after. . . ."

She had come again to the pontoon in the silent creek, surrounded by verdure as on that

first day. She wanted to look once more on these surroundings where in a moment of exaltation she had given all she had to give to this man, her great hopes, her tenderness, her illusions. The same tranquil waters lay before their eyes, the same trees dipped towards them. But the waters and the trees seemed less mysterious to her now than this man beside her, whom she knew so little and who seemed still so far away. Oh, why could he not draw near to her, why could they not mingle their beings truly, close, closer than in the closest embrace?

He covered her with kisses. But that was nothing. The thing desired, the soul's flight that she longed for, remained impossible. . . . And all at once, inspired by the possible beauties of love and crushed by the despair of knowing how unattainable was her ideal, she murmured:

"Georgie, Georgie, you seem to drift away from me. I want to read in your eyes and to know what lies behind them. . . . Georgie, my love, you're like a shadow that moves away when I try to draw near. Sometimes I think I have you, but where is the real *you*?"

From all of which Horrick drew the con-

clusion that she was his to do what he liked with. He thought of new triumphs. What she wanted, he sapiently concluded, was some new pleasure, something more daring. So she came to him full of devotion, and offered all her heart. In return he proposed a new refinement of debauchery that left her trembling with shame and degradation, a deeper shame than that of the two first sinners when they fled naked after their fall.

Horried she exclaimed:

"Oh, Georgie! No! You make me vile!"

He had nothing to offer but the love that destroys and debases, promising nothing but sensual pleasures. Believing in his stupidity that his possession would be more entire if the intimacy were robbed of all decent restraints, and that the more she was degraded, the more completely would she be subdued, he sought to increase his domination. An evil desire seized him to reduce her to his own degree of corruption. But some instinct told Elsie that she could never allow herself to sink to those depths.

"Oh! leave me! stop this foulness! . . . You would drag me to the gates of hell; but

I am thirsty for other kisses than these that sow only fever and disgust. . . . Leave me alone."

And so she saw the last lights of her *ignis fatuus* flicker out. She refused obstinately to believe that the least affection for him could remain. She left him each time exhausted but never subdued.

For now she realized all that there was of infamy in these loveless surrenders, understood that she would soon be thrown aside as a worn-out instrument. . . . It was to this that he had brought that tender wifely submission of which she had dreamed! And since she could no longer resolve to yield to him and obey him, she felt growing within her a sly desire for a vengeance that should be at least equal to the offense, a desire to laugh up her sleeve at his fury, to make him suffer. . . . If she could only catch him in tears!

For some time she had had a troubled existence with him, but she was to all appearances, uncompromised, in this country where young girls enjoy so much freedom that the most daring conduct will receive the benefit of the doubt. In other lands it would have been said

openly that she was his mistress, but here, to those who did not know that Horrnick was married, she was simply, like so many others, a girl walking out with her young man.

Only Mrs. Horrnick, the betrayed wife, could speak certainly of the nature of their relations. Several times Elsie had seen her, worn-out and looking as though she were terrorized, spying on them from a distance in the street. At first Elsie felt no scruple. When one accepts love as a rebel, one takes it wherever it is to be found. It was only later, when she became conscious of her own deceptions, that she gave a thought to the troubles of this poor creature, sickly and defenceless, whose place she had usurped.

* * * * *

Then, suddenly, Elsie felt crushed by the monotony of her adventure. She felt the staleness of an emotion within the reach of all, and of which she had quickly had her fill. Mingled with her desire to break with it was a wish to try her strength; she wanted, woman though she was, to have the upper hand. And to the extent that she showed herself more rebellious, this man, who hitherto had always

imposed his will upon his womenfolk, became more conciliatory, more submissive.

She was mischievous, false, full of damnable artifices. She wasted his time and upset his plans to such an extent that he lost his employment. She demanded money from him and got it for the asking, to distribute in charity. When she found that Mrs. Horrick was kept short, she managed secretly to pass some of it on to her.

Oh, to hurt him! . . . Hurt him and then despise him and tell him of it! Yes, to torture him in her turn, to watch him growing pale with anxiety, laugh at his troubles, then calm him with a look and make him humbly beg her pardon. She would refuse it and throw him into despair again, bruised and vanquished. . . . She would have lived henceforth for revenge if she had been capable of the littleness of a long-drawn-out campaign of malice.

Annie, who grieved for Horrick's troubles, Annie, happy and jealous at once at the sight of his tears, felt disposed to offer him again the consolations of her own love, so long held in reserve; she had always believed that he would come back to her when his whim was over.

But instead of being a delectable composing draught, Annie's tender offers were only an insipid drug, a sickening decoction to Horrick's palate. When, deaf to her tender remonstrances, he had raved and cursed, he was more crushed, more lamentably weak and despairing than ever. He stood very humble henceforth at that door that had been the mute witness of sweet encounters of other days, whose threshold he had passed as a conqueror. Even Annie came to feel contempt for a man so visibly crushed. Her self-respect returned and with it her airs. She ceased to be just "Annie" and became "Mrs. Bartrum." Oh, yes! she was good now, went to chapel and displayed once more the calendar lately so odious in its reminders that the hours were passing. She took to marking off one by one with a pencil the long days and longer nights that separated her from her Jimmy's return.

For, from her windows she could see Horrick prowling along by the walls like a thief, looking out for Elsie in order to plead with her again. In his chagrin he had taken to drink; for Elsie he was now only an object of aversion.

Elsie had regained her love of the open air,

of wide deserted places, where the wind sighed and the breezes buffeted her face. She loved the parks, sunlit or shadowed according to the hour, nearly always solitary. She loved the thoughts and aspirations, splendid and unrealizable, that came to her in the silence. She loved that bitter-sweet joy of being alone, which is the possession of the abandoned, the disinherited, the humble, the vanquished, the independent and the truly great, those whose sorrow passes the power of words and expresses itself without them. In this way she rediscovered her real nature. For too long this love, light as it was, had held her prisoner. Her chains were not strong enough. She must escape.

The great spaces. . . . The large horizons. . . . Adventure. . . . Freedom. . . . And unsubdued! . . . A violent contempt for all her past sorrows came over her. She walked with the proud and undaunted air of a fierce virgin whom love no more than man had been able to restrain. . . . She had tasted all the emotions, all the joys it promised! Deception! . . . Even her victory over Horrick appeared negligible, too narrow, too human.

Only she forgot that once more she had committed the same fault. No more than in the case of religion had she yielded herself up candidly. She had foolishly sought an ideal, impossible perfection.

None the less she was not disconsolate. All things considered, she had had the best of it. . . . For assuredly it is these unhappy loves, broken, incomplete and causing suffering, that hold most emotion and shed most beauty. On their tears and ashes poets are born and prosper. They offer what is most worthy of being sung, and expand the soul with a sublime distress. . . . Better this than the placid and perfect love that develops without any poetry in the mean environment of an everyday happiness, and is most often unconscious of itself.

She believed that now she had indeed found the truth, and, proud of her independence, she rejoiced in her still greater sadness.

Only there was one figure too long ignored that haunted Elsie now with a feeling of remorse. It was the abandoned wife. Several times already, passing by her windows, she had looked into Mrs. Horrick's room and seen her weeping.

That was why, wishing to be kind, she wrote:

“DEAR MRS. HORRICK,—

“I am in despair at what has happened. But, believe me, I was deeply in love with Georgie, like when you love, or think you love, for the first time. I never thought of the harm I was doing. I have only just realized it to-day and I want to give him back to you. My only regret is that I don't feel more sorry at losing him. I understand too late how wrong it was to draw him away from his wife and his children, and I will do my best to make up for it.

“I believed in him, too, and I was deceived just as you were, because I gave him everything, I gave him that which I hold most sacred, myself.”

“I had to tell you this; and if you feel you can't forgive me, your revenge will be that this is the first time I've ever humbled myself to ask anybody's pardon.

“Last Saturday when he came to me I sent him away with fifteen shillings for you and some sweets for the children, but he came back

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drunk and tried to hit me. I ran away and I haven't seen him since.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Horrick. I hope your husband will come back to you. In a week or two I am going to Australia, and I shall go happy if I have your pardon. In the new country I shall try to forget. God bless you as I bless you.

"E. FARQUHAR."

CHAPTER IV

'Ah, once more,' I cried, 'ye stars, ye waters,
On my heart your mighty charm renew;
Still, still, let me, as I gaze upon you,
Feel my soul becoming vast like you.'

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

ELSIE, however, did not go away. The clerk in the shipping company to whom she had applied for a reduced passage did not keep his promise, and she waited in vain for her ticket at the Dock Gates.

Una Hanley, to whom she told her story, suggested that they should go and "make a row about it" at the manager's office, but on the way they met Phyllis Jones and Daisy Turner and forgot their errand. For Phyllis had come into a legacy a few days before when Messrs. Clark, Upham & Toad, solicitors of Princes Square, had informed her of the death of an uncle in Brisbane of whose existense she had never heard. As she was the sole inheritor she had since been engaged in making the money fly, an arduous task in which she had enlisted without any difficulty the services of an expanding circle of friends. Nor were there

lacking sharks and parasites to snap up the crumbs.

These dissipations provided a fortunate diversion for Elsie in her trials, taking her out of her habitual disquietude. She admired her friends for their unrestrained and easy joys, for their deep depressions which lasted about as long as a summer shower, and for the superb incoherence that, in spite of their miserable condition, characterized every act of their hectic existence. Their rule of life was an easy one, simply to follow without resistance the impulse of the moment, and, careless of what Destiny might have in store for them, they appeared even to find a certain harmony in this disorder that they accepted so light-heartedly.

This manner of living was a revelation to Elsie. Evidently there was something of saintliness in it, so calm and equable was their acceptance of all the vicissitudes of life, even those most heavy with consequences. They had all the disdain of the poor in spirit for the vain shadows of existence. Their days passed free from perturbation under the hand of God.

She felt herself now to be in a *milieu* so free from common prejudices, scruples and moral

encumbrances that good and evil alike no longer counted. She had even a vague intuition that to surrender completely, to accept the bad with the good and even at need to roll in the mire still preserving her innocence at heart, would be the only way to that insensibility, that hardening of the soul into serene indifference that seems so desirable, so inaccessible, and almost sacred a state.

For some time now Elsie had rented a room from a Mrs. Moses in Weston Peverell. Mrs. Moses was a white-haired old lady who represented herself as the widow of a clergyman. She was said to be quite comfortably off, notwithstanding her sordid surroundings, but she was very miserly, and two or three rooms in her house were let to young women.

One of them, Winnie Lee, said to Elsie on the day of her arrival:

"Don't you stay here! Clear out."

As Elsie did not understand, she continued:

"I've been looking at you and I know what I'm talking about. You clear out."

Then she added, more persuasively:

"You think you're free, but you wouldn't do—well, never mind what."

Then, as Elsie pressed her to explain herself, she said:

"When Mrs. Moses offers you tea, it's absolutely necessary to clear out."

But several days passed without Mrs. Moses offering her tea, and Winnie merely said, to Elsie's great surprise:

"You can take my word for it, I've already made some of them clear out after she's asked them to have tea."

Mrs. Moses herself was a mystery to Elsie, for on certain evenings, in spite of the increasing coldness of the time of the year, she would go out to the end of the bare and ill-kept little garden, where there was a solitary withered tree. There, in the midst of the hens, she would hoist herself up by a branch, giving wild cries and going off into peals of laughter.

Elsie, looking at her through the window, pointed her out to Winnie.

"What on earth is she doing?"

"I know people who would be scared by her."

"But what is she doing in the tree?"

"She says she can fly too."

"Like her hens?"

"Oh, think what you like."

When it rained she lay down in the rabbit hutches, declaring that that was good enough for a human being, for the humanity that she seemed to hold in supreme contempt. "I would crawl so, naked; naked!" she would repeat, so that some people said she fancied she was a saint—and others merely affirmed that she was mad.

"She'll offer you tea at five o'clock to-day," said Winnie one day, when Elsie had been indoors all the afternoon.

And in fact no sooner did they hear the rapid footsteps of the lamplighter on the pavement than Mrs. Moses called Elsie and Winnie to come down to the kitchen together. The table was already laid with plates and cups and saucers, and Mrs. Moses was sitting near the fire, knitting, with her back to them.

Then Winnie jogged Elsie's elbow according to plan, and said:

"Now's the time; do what I told you."

Elsie said to the old lady: "Will you tell us a story?"

Scratching herself violently just above the ear with a knitting needle, until she made the

grotesque collection of ribbons and artificial flowers that composed her bonnet dance on her head, Mrs. Moses looked at her audience over the top of her spectacles and began:

"There was once a young girl who slept every night close to a certain grave in a cemetery."

"Bah!" sneered Winnie, "we all live in a cemetery, more or less. I reckon our hearts are the cemeteries of our pleasures and our dead hopes. Anyhow, we all end up in the cemetery."

"Don't interrupt!" said the old lady dryly.

Winnie shrugged her shoulders. "The old girl is dotty!" she whispered. Then she cried suddenly: "The milk! Look! the milk's boiling over."

At these words Mrs. Moses jumped up with surprising agility and made towards the fireplace. Winnie, profiting by her agitation, pulled out the drawer of the table and Elsie saw that it was full of jewelry of all kinds thrown in pell-mell.

"There you are," she said. "Just a twist of the fingers. That's how we do it, I and the rest!"

She gave Elsie to understand that these

exhibits were all stolen, and that Mrs. Moses employed her lodgers for the purpose.

"Life is hard," Winnie murmured, "and you've got to make your choice—the man or his watch. Either you take or you let yourself be taken. You don't get anything for nothing anywhere. It will soon be your turn, and the old devil will ask you to make your choice."

Then she added brusquely:

"Clear out!"

She must have read a dumb stupefaction in Elsie's eyes, for, calming herself, she remarked gravely:

"I thought so. It's made you think a bit. You thought you were free, but I knew very well you were not. Clear out quick. You see that you won't be able to do it, so get out!"

And as Elsie had risen, profiting by the distraction of Mrs. Moses, who was still occupied with her saucepans, Winnie Lee whispered:

"Take my word for it. I spoke to you like that because I could see by the look of you that you're not like us, that you want to keep yourself decent. Oh, I saw it at once!"

And as Elsie, with her eyes on Mrs. Moses, retreated silently out of the room, the old lady,

without noticing her departure, resumed her seat, and still scratching her ear with the knitting needle, resumed:

"There was once a young girl who slept every night near a certain grave——"

But the only listener was Winnie, who already knew the story that Elsie was never to hear told.

Elsie was now on the pavement, the fresh air caressing her face. Invisible trams, their bells ringing with a note of despair, glided through the mist of a late autumn evening. The faces and clothes of passers-by glistened in the rain, and the pavements and wood-blocks gave back their reflections like mirrors. The lights of the street were as intoxicating as a new joy after a long sojourn in shadows. Noise and life once more!

"Free? . . . Free?" reflected Elsie. "Winnie said I was not free because I wouldn't do what isn't right."

The idea disturbed her for a moment, but she turned to the healthier thought that, on the contrary, she was most certainly free because she could if she wished, refuse to do wrong and live in that full and majestic unconscious-

ness that refuses all rule and restraint, a vagabond life directed only by her own tastes.

At one time she reappeared in Chapel Street, Devonport, but life soon became impossible for her there. She seemed to be regarded as a pest and a wet-blanket to the district. People gave her a wide berth, which did not greatly surprise her, as ever since she had written her letter to Mrs. Horrick she had come to regard herself as under a curse, a sort of Jonah. But the real reason of their aversion was that since her return, her hatred of compromise had grown into a veritable passion. She had come to regard herself as an instrument specially chosen to expose it. Imprudently, but with the noblest intentions, she set herself to denounce it whenever it came her way, crying scandal from the house-tops, dividing households against themselves, setting husbands against wives, as of old she had done for Dora Jenkins and her captain, and generally rendering life intolerable for such as lived, as did all her neighbours, in a conspiracy of silence and connivance at evil. It was not long, therefore, before all doors were shut against her.

Then she rejoined her friends, five or six

irresponsible and tormented creatures like herself, each with her own vice, her own demon, her own folly. They gave free rein to their passions and went their way laughing, crying, suffering, making to suffer and forgetting all in a moment, towards the final debacle. She frequented the society of fallen women, the flotsam and jetsam of our social system. Her life was in complete disorder.

But she was still good to look at. She had not yet fallen to the lowest depths, for, in spite of all the examples around her, she still sought to become again what she had always wished to be, pure and spotless, and deaf to those sensual appeals which, in the last resort, could never satisfy her.

She was free now, however, from torment and dismay. She had reached the summit of her Calvary after treading for so long the *Via Dolorosa*, where she had looked in vain for the true friend that would have helped her, the sure pilot who could have guided her to the goal. Heaven had granted to her at last the peace of a forgetfulness in which all her unhappiness was lost. The divine privilege of the life she was henceforth to live, among

those of whom it has been said that they shall enter into the Kingdom of the Father before the elect, was this—that she was interested in nothing and in nobody any longer, not even in herself. She had attained the Centre of Indifference.

The waves of this life closed over her, and she left no trace.

* * * * *

Yet some one found her, some one who had known her well and had even loved her. And recalling those brief encounters when chance had thrown them together and he had believed himself very near to her, he said:

“Do you remember that evening a long time ago at Coxside? Do you remember Cumberland Street?”

“I remember.”

“Do you remember, Elsie, those days when you were good?”

“O, yes, I remember,” she murmured, and he fancied he heard a note of regret in her voice.

That was why, thinking of Horrick, with whom he believed she still lived, he continued: “And now, alas! you are your own mistress

no longer. . . . Once you refused to surrender through virtue. How different to-day! Now, you know all. Now you have learnt what love is, and the lot of women. But you are no longer 'you.'"

"We could try to go back, perhaps, and make the past live again. But no! That's all over. We should but deceive ourselves with a vain imitation of what might have been. We are worth more than that. You are worth more, Elsie."

She replied simply that one often lost the chance of making the best choice in life. And then, in her turn, she added: "A pity!"

He could not tell whether or not she was in earnest. But she looked at him for a long time in silence, for in those few words of his, where he had enunciated the creed of abstaining from the half-good, where one has a perception of the whole, he had unconsciously given expression to what had always been her own deepest aspiration, that piercing desire for perfection, for the attainment of some realizable ideal, which had remained always unsatisfied. Perhaps it occurred to her too, that she had been wrong, and that this man who stood before

her was after all the one who understood her, and knew the magic song which could have lulled her heart and given her soul repose in the interminable night that stretched before her.

But he, not knowing that she was free, kept silence; and she told him nothing. It was only later, much later, that he understood that she had forced the words back, that she had recognized herself unworthy of this love; that she too considered it a thing not to be profaned.

In fact "Too late! Too late!" was what she said before she left him.

Then, at the sound of her voice, she had burst out laughing and made her way into the midst of that Devonport Park which she seemed above all to love.

For a moment the bushes hid her from his view. Then he saw her on top of a green hill. She marched along, daughter of the open spaces, all alone and singing.

And at that moment two men passed at her side wheeling a barrow. Elsie ran after them:

"Where is the other?" she asked. "What have you done with the third?"

They looked at her, wondering.

Ah! They had forgotten his very existence:

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"Another?" they repeated, "The third man?"
What could she mean?

Perhaps she hardly knew herself, for she repeated slowly after them, with her hand on her forehead like one awaking from a dream:

"The other! What other?"

"Come, my dear, what are you talking about?" asked one of them gently.

She was silent, perplexed; she babbled a few unintelligible words while they exchanged significant glances and then smiled at her as one does at the simple-minded.

Then, clapping her hands.

"Come!" she said. "Let's sing, all three together.

One finger, two fingers . . .

Don't you know? And turn the handle of the little organ that plays only one tune, always the same and so sad . . . so sad."

The men shrugged their shoulders, full of indulgence and laughing with a good heart. And singing lustily with her they went gaily on their way, stumping along and beating the ground in cadence with their wooden crutches. Their outlines grew smaller on the horizon and disappeared gradually in a white cloud on the

far side of the hill, while, light-heartedly pushing the barrow with the now tuneless organ, she sang in chorus with the men who had forgotten her.

* * * * * *

Several months later the same passer-by thought that he saw her again. But was it really she? He could not be certain.

She, too, looked at him hesitatingly. Then she went towards him, ready in that moment, no doubt, to offer him her body and soul in memory of all the past. It seemed to him that he had only to say a word, to make a sign and she would follow him. . . . And he would have given twenty years of his life to prevent her taking a step towards him. He turned his head to avoid seeing her approach, and at the same time to hide the tears in his eyes.

"Stop!" he said. "Stop, Elsie, beloved, it is too late. . . . O strange and tortured child of an ideal, generous, noble, child whom one loves and betrays and makes suffer—who makes us suffer too—child of dream and of reality higher than our desires, unattainable. . . . You have been the fairest light that ever shone

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upon this path, you have been Woman, the substance of our passionate and foolish hopes.

"You have been the fairest; and it is this vision of yourself—of what you were—that I will hold, that I will keep within me, immaculate and safe. For this is something greater than yourself. It is not you but my own love that I defend, my love for you. Do not touch it. Stand back."

She stepped back, very pale.

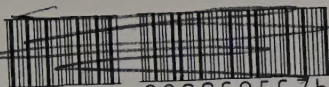
"Back further, Elsie, for you are only the shadow of that adorable You."

And she replied only, in tears:

"I am not Elsie."

He watched her walking away slowly by the high wall of Beaumont Park, dressed in the greenery of new-born spring.

At the corner a farmer in riding-coat and leggings and a round hat sat his horse while the beast drank at the fountain. . . . The long cries of the sea-gulls came up from the Barbican. . . . And Elsie went slowly up towards the top of the hill where the Workhouse and the Hospital stand face to face.



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